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PUCK:

His Vicissitudes, Adventures, Observations, Conclusions,
Friendships, and Philosophies,

RELATED BY HIMSELF,

AND EDITED BY

OUIDA,

AUTHOR OF 'STRATHMORE,' 'IDAVIA,' 'TRICOTRIN,'
'UNDER TWO FLAGS,' &c.

St. John

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.



LONDON:
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‘ Je vous ai dit ce que j’ai vu. Si vous ne l’aimez pas, ne dites pas du mal de moi. Blâmez, plutôt, votre monde dans lequel j’ai trouvé ces balourdises, ces friponneries, cette beauté qui escroque, ces femmes qui dévorent, cette passion qui ne cherche que du butin, ces amours qui ne cherchent que de l’argent.’

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PUCK.

CHAPTER I.

ROMANCES OF THE ROW.

ONE of my greatest pleasures were these mornings in the Row, especially when Beltran used to walk there in lieu of his usual noontide canter. At such times I would mount the chair beside him ; and, sitting upright on that green iron throne, I passed the peripatetics in review with a countenance that I was satisfied presented the most complete copy of the superciliousness, serenity, and sarcasm, which I saw on the faces of those around me.

If there be a Republic on earth it is the Ride from twelve to two on a May morning.

Oh, I know it is the most fashionable lounge you have, but it is a Republic for all that. There

could Bill Jacobs lean against a rail, with a clay pipe in his mouth, and a terrier under his arm, close beside the Earl of Guilliadene, with his cigarette and his eye-glass, and his Poole-cut habiliments. There could Laura Pearl, or any other of her order, sit with their priceless old laces, and their skirts of satin or velvet, sweeping against the soft, white, filmy dress of a duke's child-like daughter, in her seventeenth year, and her very first season.

There Marmion Eagle, the handsome painter, who was the Wagner of Art, and had so much genius that no one dared to hang or to purchase his pictures, could place himself by a penny next to his forbidden love the wondrous-eyed Lady Gwendoline, and for one sweet half-hour forget that he was a madman, and she a great noble's betrothed. There Maude Delamere, wearing her gold-laden cashmere as none other did, could flirt away her pleasant morning, side by side with the great Duchess of Astolat; while the duchess, eyeing the shawl, would silently appraise the worth of the marvellous fabric, and honestly admire the beauty of the wearer, being herself the only person in all London who knew not that both cashmere and Delamere were as much the pro-

perty of His Grace of Astolat as was his stud or kennel.

There could the tired shop-girl, escaped for an hour from the heated show-rooms on some thrice-blessed Belgravian errand, pause beneath the trees, and receive a fresh incentive to remain virtuous on ten shillings a week by the sight of Lillian Lee, with her glistening chignon, and her velvet habit, and her jewelled whip, leaning down from her hundred-guinea hack to laugh with Lord Brune and Freddy Orford.

There also could the weary author, or the generous gentleman, whose brain was being maddened or whose heart was being broken by the curse of too much honour and too little gold, behold how great a thing it was to be a cheat; as Fiodora, the great usurer, rode by on his black Arab; or the old withered yellow face of the unwedded capitalist, Baron Moresco, brought smiles to those fair patrician lips with which they never greeted mere wit or talent, blood or beauty, in the men who passed beside their chairs.

The Row surely is a Republic; for in it first come, first served; and a copper coin will throne alike the ambassadress and the traviata, the aristocrat and

the cad, the creditor and the debtor. But all, still, are not equal, you object?—ah, bah! if that be your objection to a Republic, you had best remain a Conservative till the end of time.

On this common ground I met, as I have said, King Arthur, and Fanfreluche, and many other dogs of high rank and breeding who were wont, like myself, to saunter their mornings away in the Park.

Once also I saw Bronze—poor, patient, faithful Bronze. He was wandering wearily among that gay butterfly crowd, searching, searching, searching everywhere; on his endless and hopeless errand. A groom lashed him with his whip; a policeman kicked him away as a stray cur; Lillian Lee rode her horse viciously at him; Laura Pearl's page drove him with a curse from resting a moment under her carriage out of the scorch of the sun. And I—well! I have promised you to be as honest as Jean Jacques—I, throned on my green chair, affected not to see him!

Partly, it was because I dreaded greatly to tell him that the boy Harold was dead, and that his quest was useless. Chiefly, I knew it was because a Countess, Beltran's sister, had spread her gold-broidered burnous for my throne, and the Astolat dog, the most supercilious of poodles, sat beside me;

and with my snow-white curls, my gay blue ribbon, and the pretty arrogant air with which I had learned to cock my eye and lift my nose, I shrank from recognition of that dusty, tired, starving, homeless creature.

It was shameful, I knew ; our race is scarcely ever tainted by such weaknesses ; but, whilst you condemn me, think a moment,—are you eager to bow to a ruined man in the Row ? Will you check your horse by the rails to smile on a poor relation ? Will you shake hands in the face of the town with a penniless strolling artist in a linen blouse, and with a wooden pipe in his mouth, though you may know he has the genius of a Raphael and the heart of a François d'Assise ? No :—ninety-nine out of a hundred of you won't ; my false shame of poor Bronze has many analogies in your humanity.

Yet none the less did I feel remorse for it ; we always do feel acute remorse whenever we descend to your level by wounding a friend, or by fawning on a foe. And I would fain have darted after him, and made full and instant amends for my wickedness, but, at the first motion that I gave, the Countess's little hand caught my collar, and held me motionless down on my seat.

It seemed indeed as though she had divined my intention ; and felt that a display of friendship from Prosperity to Poverty would be an unseemly anomaly, unfit for that place of fair fashion.

I confessed my sin that day to Fanfreluche.

‘ Bless me, my dear ! ’ said that cynic. ‘ You’ve no business to have learned your lesson so quick : you don’t live with a woman ! ’

She had never recovered, nor was ever likely to recover, the sharp jealousy which she felt of my selection by her hero ; but she had an excellent heart in her way, though such a bitter little thing, and she was often very good-natured indeed.

That day I coaxed out of her at last as much as she knew of that story of Derry Denzil’s, which she had once promised, and always afterwards refused, to tell me.

He had just passed us, on his black mare, with his glass in his eye, and his cigarette in his mouth, and the sunshine full on his dark, handsome, reckless face.

‘ Story, my dear ? every one of those men has a story,’ said Miss Volubility, when I reminded her of her promise. ‘ It makes me mad to hear that wretched Mouse, when he wants to slate a very good

novel, declare that there is no romance in real life. Good gracious ! Why, no novelist would dare to write half the things that I know have happened—the coincidences are too marvellous, the fates too bizarre, the anomalies too glaring, the skein of circumstances too entangled, in real life, for any novelists to dare to paint exactly all that they see or know.* Do all reviewers live in a nutshell, and absorb themselves in an eternity of knitting and muffins, and threepenny whist, that they persist in declaring there is no romance in real life ? Heavens ! —the unutterable woe, the insane passions, the extraordinary contradictions, the horrible ruin, the wonderful accidents, forming themselves like a kaleidoscope picture, that I have beheld in my season of existence ! The wildest novel was never one half so wild as the real fate of many a human life that to superficial eyes looks serene, and placid, and uneventful enough. Life is just the same now, as in the ages of the *CEdipus* agony, and the *Orestes* crime : it is only that now—they show nothing.'

'But tell me what happened to him,' I urged, yawning a little.

* I beg thoroughly to corroborate this opinion of Mlle Fanfreluche, whom I report faithfully, but with whom I do not always agree.—ED.

‘Oh, you little idiot!’ she cried, disgusted. ‘One would certainly think you were a woman—always staring at one little whelk on the shore, and always ignoring the whole great ocean and sky! The whelk is the one narrow personality; the waves and horizon are the vast expanse of universal circumstance.’

‘You are almost as bad as an English girl that I belonged to once for a few months. She was the wife of the great Belgian painter, Philip Cornaro; she was a pretty creature, with no brains. One glorious evening, down by the Biscay coast,—they lived there at that time in an exquisite villa,—he was painting out-of-doors; painting a great golden comet that floated over a purple sky, above a moonlit sea.

‘The bells of a campanile rang eight and nine and ten; he painted on and on and on; and I sat quiet beside him. For there was a spell in this marvellous night, with that mystical messenger from the unknown gods to men waiting there, in the still starlit skies, above the hushed calm waters.

‘The girl stole up beside us, feverishly, twice or thrice. At length, as the bells rang the tenth hour, she came again swiftly and shook him by the arm. He

started,—thus unwelcomely roused from out of his great mystic dreams.

“Come at once, Cornaro,” she whispered ; “I have waited so long—so long !”

‘He roused himself with a sigh.

“I cannot come,” he said patiently, gazing, with his whole soul in his eyes, at the sea and the sky.

“Cannot! And why?” she cried in vexed wonder.

“Why!” he echoed, “look there, love,—that splendour will never revisit the earth for five centuries.”

‘She pushed the brush from his hand with a pout on her ruddy lips :

“The comet! Who cares for that? you must come in. *The tea is getting cold!*”

‘And then people say that incompatibility of character is not reason enough for a divorce!’ the duke’s poodle added, as Fanfreluche paused in her long recital.

‘Ah, they say so, Poodle,’ that cynic responded. ‘But nobody’s ever proved it yet, I think.’

‘This is not Denzil’s story?’ I urged, my mind curiously dwelling on Mrs D’Eyncourt.

‘He’s fifty stories, my dear,’ said Fanfreluche.

‘They all of ’em have. Look there,—do you see Peel Vavasour, that little, dry, slender chip of a man who is hardly bigger than his own fusee? Well, he’s the hardest rider that ever sent a horse at a six-bar; and the boldest trooper that ever led his men into the jaws of hell. Yet do you know that, for ten whole years, that man has been given over, heart and body and soul, to the wildest, saddest, direst passion that ever possessed a life?

‘See yonder too,—on that sorrel hunter that is plunging and tearing at its bit,—that is Sir George Maude of Effingham. Is he not your beau-ideal of a fair, frank, fearless, sunny-hearted English gentleman, with his golden beard blowing in the wind, and his blue eyes glancing in the light, and his manly laugh ringing out so cheerily? Well, my dear—go home with George, or rather go where he never goes, to that grand old Effingham in the western woods, by the western seas, that looks like Launcelot’s ocean-castle; and you will find the picture of a woman there. A woman with Titian’s hair and Boucher’s velvet eyes; smiling; with a scarlet flower held against her lips, in a pretty unspoken symbolic “hush!” Well—that woman was George’s wife.

‘And the picture is locked in a darkened room

that never is opened, nor hears the fall of foot-steps, nor sees the light of day. She had all his big, brave, kindly heart, and all his loyal undoubting honour. So,—she broke the one, and betrayed the other. To do him the more shame, moreover, she chose her paramour out of his own kith and kin. It was a horrible tale,—of worse than passion, of worse than sin. George pursued them to Paris, and would have killed his cousin—strangled him by the sheer force of his hands—if the crowd in the Bois had not torn them asunder.

‘He has been freed by the law, and the woman has wedded her lover. But the old halls of Effingham never see their master’s face; the old forests never hear the ring of his rifle; no children’s gay feet tread the grasses; no woman’s glad voice wakes the echoes. And that man is haunted for ever, by a ghost that will never be laid.’

I answered nothing—these revelations saddened me.

‘Look there again,’ pursued this pseudo-philosopher. ‘You see that cold, fair, sardonic-looking creature there, on a dark bay, wearing a rose in his coat, and riding with Paget Desmond? Well, that is Vivyan Bruce. He is a Colonel of Guards,

and in the Brigades they always call him Mephisto ; while society in general is given to saying that if Satan himself does ever walk abroad in man's guise, he clothes himself in the fleshly garb of wicked Vy Bruce, who is the deadliest shot in all Europe, and the wildest gambler that ever shook a main. Well—do you know that there is a blind woman, still lovely, even in her sightlessness, dwelling in the daintiest river-home by Cliefden, who could tell you that for tenderness, pitifulness, thoughtfulness, there is not the equal of “Mephisto” in the world. It was the old old story, of sweet forbidden love ; and lives that met too late. One terrible night she, young and beautiful, and weary of heart, for a love that never could be hers, standing beside her casement close by the gates of Frascati, was stricken by a sudden stroke of lightning, darting from above Albano, and made blind then and for ever. Her husband cursed her, and abandoned her ; this man alone cleaved to her, and took her in her senselessness and sightlessness, deeming her even thus yet fairer than all fair women. The world calls such love sin,—ah, the world is so very wise ! Well—many years have drifted by since then ; but go you and ask of Beatrice Silviera in her solitude,

where to be *his* consoles her for the loss of all besides, whether that man be indeed a devil, as they say; or whether his voice be not ever gentlest, his care be not ever surest, his patience be not ever perfect, his love be not ever infinite to her, in her darkness and her helplessness, whose eyes can never again look once into his own.'

I was silent;—awed by her unwonted gravity. I looked at him: he had a cold, hard, careless face, I thought; and he laughed idly where he rode with other men.

'You poor little brat!' cried Fanfreluche contemptuously. 'Are you, who are a dog, as foolish as those poor scribes who, being at their wits' ends for what to say, declare romance is dead in human lives! Pshaw! Do you think that because our friends there ride with flowers in their coats, and cigars in their mouths; and call the loveliest Helen only "not bad looking;" and show their friendship to Patroclus chiefly by "getting up behind him;" * and lounge in the smoking-room of their clubs as though they had not one care upon earth; that

* Mlle Fanfreluche used the fashionable slang she had caught up at the Turf, or the Rag, or the Raleigh. She means backing their friends' bills.—ED.

therefore they never search for a four-leaved shamrock ; never challenge fight for a brazen shield they deem silver ; never wear the sackcloth under the silk, and the iron belt under the velvet ; and never hunger vainly for the sight of a Holy Sepulchre that has no place save in their dreams ? Chut !—you know nothing of men !’

I was abashed : to me the riders of the Row looked nothing but a fashionable mob of well-dressed, well-mounted, easy-tempered, and somewhat bored gentlemen. But I supposed she knew best ; and to be sure Denzil, gazing at the photograph in solitude, had been a very different person to what he looked now, where he had checked his horse beside the rail, and leaned from his saddle to laugh and talk over the Epsom chances with Fred Orford.

‘Look at Derry,’ said Fanfreluche sharply, feminine-like, coming round (now I had ceased to ask her) to the very point on which she had refused information. ‘Derry is one of the gayest-tempered and most popular men on the town. And yet that man has had a good deal of grief in his life ;—and one murder. He comes of a great old family ; and he went through Eton and Christ Church, and into the Guards,—and all the rest of the course ; and till he

was five-and-twenty thought himself rich as Cræsus. At that time his father died, leaving just a hundred thousand pounds' worth of debt behind him. Derry didn't say much; but he just sold the estate—a grand old Cornish place that he loved passionately, paid all the debts, dowered his two sisters, left the Guards, and went into the Austrian army.

'There he rose rapidly; he was of the very stuff for a Cuirassier; but when he had got his majority, and had been there some nine years, and had grown fond of the service, an unlucky thing happened. He was second in a duel. It fell to his lot to measure the paces. Now, you know he is a giant in the land, and his strides are longer than those of most men. The other second, who was an Austrian of very high rank, sneered thereat.

"You seem determined to place distance enough between your principal and mine!" he cried scoffingly.

'Denzil took no notice; and the duel was fought. It ended harmlessly; with a bullet-graze on both sides. When it was over, Denzil went up to the other second who had jeered him.

"You complained a moment ago of my putting too much distance between the combatants," he

said quietly. "We will fight as close as you like, now."

'Then out he drew his handkerchief, and tendered one end to the Austrian—Highland fashion. So, breast to breast with the width of that bit of cambric betwixt them—as many gallant gentlemen were wont to stand for the death-word in the old wild Scottish days—they fired. The shots were simultaneous, and both fell. Denzil was severely wounded in the breast-bone; but the Austrian was shot through the heart.*

1. 'His brother cuirassiers concealed our friend's place of sanctuary until he had recovered sufficiently for them to get him in safety out of the country, but his career in the army was over; the high station of the dead Austrian made the duel an offence beyond pardon. Denzil took this death greatly to heart also; it was the only duel ending fatally that he had ever fought, and he travelled in many strange eastern lands for some time. Half-a-dozen years ago he came back to the old London life; a thousand a-year or so had been left him by a relative, and on this, with what

* I can bear witness that Fanfreluche describes the duel as it actually took place, without any exaggeration. So unusual a fact in a female narrator, that I think it necessary to testify to it.—ED.

he makes by these novels of his, that are so gay and so mournful, so weary and so witty, he lives well enough. But—'

'Who is Mrs D'Eyncourt?' I asked.

'Mrs D'Eyncourt? Well—Mrs D'Eyncourt was a very handsome woman, who was all the rage in London when I was just out, and belonged to the Household Brigades. She was an actress; and they made her the fashion—for a time. She was an astonishingly beautiful woman, which helped her wonderfully; and an astonishingly proud woman, which went dead against her. She came of an old race, they said; and she was deeply read, and highly cultured. Her husband was a great scoundrel, a sort of gentleman-swindler, who drove her on to the stage, and spent all she gained there—yes, and would have had no objection to have taken any of her money, howsoever it should have been made. He would have staked his wife at piquet just as soon as he would have staked a sovereign. Denzil was always about with them. He got Mrs D'Eyncourt her best engagements. He wrote the best critiques that appeared on her. He was in the stalls or behind the scenes nearly every night that she played. He was very much in love with her—that everybody

saw. But then, so were a good many others. She had the ball at her feet when she chose to spurn it away. That is—when she had been the talk of the town for two seasons, and was really making something like fame, she disappeared—nobody knows where. Everybody thought Denzil was in the secret. I can't say whether he was. But at any rate, the same night that she vanished, her husband was thrashed within an inch of his life by somebody; and found black and blue, and scarcely able to speak, with the door of his chamber shut on him. I always thought Derry did *that*.'

'And Mrs D'Eyncourt?'

'How your head runs on that woman! The last night that she appeared was a great triumph for her. A certain cabal—there is always a very strong cabal against a woman who is so unsexed that she won't accept diamonds—had done their best to write her down; had derided her, condemned her, stoned her with injury and insult from the catapults of their criticisms. But the woman was gloriously handsome, resolute too in will, and of singular talent, she was for once stronger than the strong clique against her: she carried the public with her; and the curtain fell at length on a shower

of flowers, and amidst a storm of applause. But that night was the last that the town ever saw Gertrude D'Eyncourt. Of course they all said that Derry had hidden her somewhere, especially as he went abroad the day after. He came back six months later, looking ill enough, and he horse-whipped one fellow who had repeated (so that it came to his hearing) what all the town said of this woman. And of course they were all quite sure *then* it was true.'

'But was it?'

'How can I tell, child? All I know is, that I have never heard a syllable about her from anybody, till you told me the other day of that news of Lord Mark's. But, good gracious!—how you chatter. There are our ponies moving off. I wouldn't miss going with them for worlds. Pearl lunches this morning with some men at the Leviathan, and that Hotel is the only place where they do aspic with plovers' eggs, so that I can eat it.'

And away the little chatterbox and gourmet trotted, ringing her golden bells, and presently jumping into the carriage, was whirled out of sight by the swiftly-trotting feet of Pearl's ponies.

Derry Denzil was talking over the Danebury

cracks, by the rails ; Peel Vavasour was making some man shriek with laughter, by relating a new double entendre of Schentack's ; Sir George was discoursing with great animation of the last run of the season with the York and Ainsty ; and Vy Bruce was murmuring idlest nonsense to Lillian Lee, as he lighted one of his cigarettes for her use.

I sat on my chair bewildered and saddened. You always are, I think, whenever Belphegor first unroofs the houses for you.





CHAPTER II.

BELTRAN.

THE new burlesque thrive at the Coronet. It was a success, as you say in your odd jargon. The reckless breakdowns, the puns, which it seemed really had some humour in them, and were therefore quite uncommon, the splendid Parisian dresses, the lively music, all insured its popularity. And Laura Pearl shone in her jigs, the number of which was increased, according to her desire, with a rollicking zest that raised her higher than ever in the stalls' estimation.

She was generally late to arrive, sullen when crossed for a moment, capricious and ungrateful to an incredible extent, and self-willed with a stubborn-

ness of temper which would have brought her heavy fines and loud curses from the tyrannical 'old Wynch,' had she been one of those luckless girls who lived in attics and slaved on twenty shillings a week. As it was, of course nobody dared say a word to her; and all the wrath of that Jupiter Tonans, the acting manager, fell on the oftentimes innocent and invariably defenceless heads of those hapless young players who had holes in their gloves, and rents in their boots, and a hungry pinched look in their faces, and who toiled in the rain and the gaslight to and from the theatre on foot, whilst her brougham drove up or away with much noise and fury and display, and a dashing roan mare that stepped up to its nose.

Although Beltran had protested against dogs being taken there, I often went down to the Coronet with him; and few things ever amused me much more when I ceased to be bewildered at the strangeness of the life there.

He was not very often there himself, however; except on such evenings as he had those suppers which were the talk of the town:—little, costly, dainty repasts, where a certain sort of wit really did circulate, dead though wit is in

your modern society, and where they sometimes played piquet, or écarté, or lansquenet till the morning. There were scarcely more than ten or twelve men—his most intimate companions—that ever had the entrance to the little gilded amber-hued chamber; and of course as it became to be considered very *chic* to get the pass there, and as equally, of course, all the women of his own world were jealous in their own minds of what they could not enter into, the many who were excluded said very fearful things of the few who were admitted, and I do verily believe that Beltran's suppers were considered by society to recall Borgia's feasts or d'Argenson's nunnery. He knew this very well, but he only laughed at it himself; and did nothing to uproot the conviction. He knew very well also that he seldom drank anything stronger there than iced seltzer water, and never did anything worse there than lose his hundreds on a quartorze of queens. He could have made an end to the reports in a week by inviting a score when he only asked half-a-dozen; but that would not have been a mode of remedy at all like Vere Essendine.

So he continued to shut his doors against the many; and the many continued to assert that the

Coronet supper-room was a compound of the Parc aux Cerfs and the Agapemone, with champagne and picquet in its entr'actes.

All the horrors that were whispered of it, however, never prevented the chastest dame that ever I heard of, or the haughtiest Belgravian matron, from accepting with pleasure and smiles his offer of a box for the season. Indeed, to spend an hour and a half while the burlesque was on, behind those dainty rose-silk curtains of the *loges*, with little cups of orange pekoe sent to them in his tiniest and choicest china, was one of the pet amusements of the great ladies of his own order; and they would turn their handsome eyes from resting, through their lorgnons, on the Pearl, to smile with sunny welcome on his entrance to their box.

Of course they all considered his conduct shocking when they spoke of it in their own boudoirs; but that was no reason why they should refuse his fashionable theatre and his fragrant tea. And they never gave a sign that they knew Laura Pearl was anything more than a very well-dressed marionette made of wood and hung upon wires.

In your admirable world there is nothing more easy or more convenient than to ignore, except

indeed it be to go one step further and—forget.

Your unlucky people, who find it difficult to do the first, break the rules of tact and of good society; your unhappy people who cannot do the last, break things of less consequence—their hearts.

In this new world of mine I liked every one save this Pearl of price, and she for her part cordially detested me, though by me she had gained a pair of ear-rings worth two hundred sovereigns and a pink tea-set worth fifty. Whenever she saw me—if Beltran's eye was off her—she slapped, or shook, or pinched me; and once gave me a fearful fall by jerking me off the carriage rug from the foot-board of a very lofty mail phaeton.

'Be so good as to leave that dog alone, Laura,' Beltran said to her one day when she was clutching mercilessly at my curls till I screamed.

'I shan't then!' she retorted; and therewith struck me with her fan so hard a blow that the tortoiseshell sticks broke in shivers.

Beltran smiled—well pleased.

'Women's temper generally ends in their own losses,' he murmured. 'You don't look handsome when you get savage.'

Which assurance only made her more furious :— this sort of amenities was the usual characteristic of their intercourse, and I often marvelled why a man so fond of repose and so impatient of anything like a scene could voluntarily subject himself to it. I remarked this once to Fanfreluche.

That little canine *cocodette* turned her nose in the air with her wonted gesture of scorn.

‘My dear! where’s another woman so handsome?’

And this was true.

You people when you write about love do not allow enough weight to the influence of purely physical attractions.

The town had pronounced Laura Pearl the ‘handsomest thing out.’ It is as agreeable to a man’s pride and sense of possession to hear this said of his mistress, as it is for him to hear his year-old racer pronounced nearer perfection than all the two hundred and odd horses to be seen in the yard on a Sunday afternoon. This is not a lofty motive for passion, you say?—ah, well! I cannot help that. A great many of your motives are not lofty.

Beltran moreover had been bred and born in a sphere where women, after all, are really held in

much the same esteem as in any oriental country, though they are treated with more outward forms of deference and courtesy; and cost a very great deal more for their maintenance. In his youth he had been besieged and disgusted by marriage-makers of his own order; and he had now in his manhood got into a congenial habit of only seeking his loves in a world from which the demon of marriage was exorcised.

He did not want mental power in his mistress, nor yet affection;—he found the first, in plenty, in other forms of society; and he looked on the latter with a sort of horror as on something that would ‘bore’ him infallibly and unbearably.

Indeed, like many men of his time, he did his very utmost to persuade himself that he was heartless, and everybody else that he was mindless.

Yet a keener intelligence than his few men were born with; and a truer friend than he was never lived. Now, your fine intelligence will always soon or late grow dissatisfied with abasing itself to the senses; and he who can be a sincere friend has also in him the capability of sincere love.

A trifle, too, showed me this temper in him.

[And by the way, permit me to add that if you

were quicker and wiser at guessing your companions' characters from the indices of trifles, you would not make those everlasting blunders of foolish trust and idiotic suspicion which so continually excite in you the contempt and wonder of dogs!]

This happened when I had been about a month in his possession.

'What a pity that boy was in such a deuce of a hurry to kill himself,' said Denzil, one evening, as they drove down to a Richmond dinner. I being ensconced in the back-seat, and there being, for once, no woman in the front.

'What boy?' asked Beltran.

'That poor young wretch who wrote the Demeter. I see they have brought some posthumous poems of his out "by the late Harold Gerant," and they are likely to make a sensation. There is certainly wonderful stuff in them—'

'How do they get out if he's dead? I thought publishers would have nothing to say to him.'

'They would have nothing—whilst he was alive. That is their way. They have a knack of thinking that genius, like Ganges grass, only exhales its worth when it's been well crushed. It seems that there were manuscripts of his lying about in varior

places ; and after the issue of that fragment the Trade thought it a decent speculation to collect, and to issue them.'

'More fool the Trade, then. While Massinger, and Forde, and Marvell lie unread in ninety-nine libraries out of a hundred, who wants the catchpenny jingle of 19th-century verse ?'

'Come, come,—you said yourself that there was great promise in that fragment.'

'So I might. But I take it if the man's dead it don't matter much what he promised ; he can't come up to time with any of it, whether it's a promissory note or a promissory poem.'

'Don't be a brute, Vere ! The poor lad would rest quieter in his grave, I fancy, for knowing that those thoughts of his are not all lost.'

'Everybody does rest quiet in his grave, I believe, unless he's scooped up with a spade by an enterprising Railway Company. You literary men do allow yourselves such poetic license of expression. Surely from your own sentimental point of view you ought to be awfully glad this young idiot did kill himself : who would know anything of Chatterton if it weren't for that lucky dose of prussic acid, and who would care a hang for Shelley, if in lieu of dying

poetically, he had lived to grow fat, leave off his sailor's jacket, read family prayers, and turn Laureate ?'

'If you would only read this book—'

'I ! good gracious ! When do I ever read anything, unless it be a novel of yours, or of Lawrence's ?'

'If you would only read the poem you would see what it is that I mean. There are a hundred faults in them, of course ; but there is a wonderful glow of imagery and depth of thought in them for the works of so mere a boy. No pretentiousness either ; no borrowed Catullan images ; no mock incestuous rapture ; but the strength of passions struggling with their tempters like young lions in a net, and yet, with all their latent woe and fire, the purity of a mind that had evidently fed on the simplicity of some free, open-air, and meditative life—the only true life for the poet and the painter. If you would for once read them—'

'But I never shall, my dear Derry. So I will take your praises on trust ; the only way not to be obliged to disagree with them. Just now—rhapsodies on bisque soup and red mullets are more to my taste. I wish your dead boy all sorts of living laurels, but

I clearly foresee that he will grow into a bore. Pray don't let us have too much of him.'

Denzil flung himself back in his seat, a little out of temper.

I, lying coiled in my tiger rug, wondered within myself.

It so chanced that a month or so earlier I had happened to go out in the forenoon with Beltran, at a different hour to his usual one. And he had wended his way, walking, with a cigar in his mouth, to a certain house of business; where with my own ears I had distinctly heard him, in a somewhat long business interview, commission the principals of the house to search for all manuscripts bearing the inscription attached to the poem of *Demeter*; when found, to have the noblest of such fragments selected by some scholar competent to make the choice, and then to have them printed and issued with as little delay as possible, and at his own cost. I had also heard the persons he thus commissioned ask if they might, without offence, inquire the reason for his interest in the young dead penniless writer?—and had heard his answer. 'Interest? None in the least. I never saw him in my life. But the boy had genius; and

it ought not to be buried with his body : '—and therewith he left, desiring that ~~his~~ name should not in any way be associated with the affair, but that the publishers themselves should appear to be the originators, as well as the executors, of the matter.

Herein it appeared that he had been thoroughly well obeyed. The poems had appeared, been discussed, been admired, and the name of the dead boy was on the lips of many ; but not a soul ever dreamed that he had so much as thought twice of the story of the suicide that Denzil had told at his Sunday breakfast.

But why conceal this generous and sympathetic action ?—and conceal it too with this cynical assumption of contemptuous indifference ?

Nay, I cannot tell ; I can only say it was his way of belying himself ; a way I have known in more men than one of like temperament.

' They do good by stealth and blush to find it known '—or rather swear impatiently to find it known, as their manner is. I do not say that this masking of all their better acts and thoughts is of itself commendable ; but I think, in view of the innumerable creatures who crow out aloud their own charities, and of the abundant hypocrites who only

fold their robes to hide their vice and avarice, such exceptions as his are refreshing, and not to be condemned. If you have not known men like him, men of this order and of this habit of speech and act, you will not be likely to comprehend the character of this master of mine.

Presently we dashed over Richmond Hill, and drew up before the old Star and Garter. And here Beltran, with the Duke of Astolat, Ned Guiliadene, a *Chargé d'Affaires*, and a Guardsman, gave one of those dinners which seemed part and parcel of his duties as lessee of the Coronet. A dinner where all the prettiest of his actresses blossomed forth in the most intensely Parisian of dresses, and many hundred pounds' worth of diamonds and rubies. Where the portly dame, always attached to the house, who would be either Hamlet's mother or Mrs Candour, the Countess Capulet or Mrs Bouncer, appeared in velvets of the richest purple, or violet, or ruby, for she played propriety on many scarcely proper occasions, and this is a lucrative office always gratefully acknowledged. Where that charming woman, Mrs Delamere, (who on the stage had something of the sympathetic acting and elegant ease of the French school, yet saw herself almost disregarded by an

audience eager for the breakdowns and burlesque of Laura Pearl,) brought the superb grace and proud negligence of a duchess, though her forsaken lord was a wine-merchant's clerk, who had wedded her out of a milliner's work-room. Where the male comedians, making in private the same blunder that distinguished them in public, thought coarseness and buffoonery were wit; and took an insane relish in the privilege of the moment, which allowed them to address without prefix as 'Beltran,' and 'Brune,' and 'Desmond,' and 'Denzil,' men who, meeting them the next day in Pall Mall, barely gave them a nod of the head as good morning. Such a dinner as their host had sat at hundreds of times, bored to death by the drear monotony of the thing, which so exactly reproduced itself one year after another. He knew precisely when Mrs Delamere would smile, when Mrs Mac Mundo would frown, what puns his first comedy-man would make, and where he would infallibly make them; what pretty consternation his actresses would show at the first questionable story that came round with the chablis; what flushed amusement they would receive a much naughtier one with, when they had come to the chartreuse; what riotous laughter the Pearl

would give to the punsters as she crammed the crystallized sweetmeats into her rosy mouth and had her armies of glasses replenished again and again ; what exquisite dignity disdainful Maude Delamere would show as she swept away on the terrace with her black laces all trailing about her ; and what nonsense he should be expected to murmur in the scent of the geraniums and heliotropes to these women, every turn of whose features, and every tone of whose voices, he knew as well as the letters of the alphabet. Dinners at which his actors would drink the rich wines, and the actresses eat the rare fruits, of his giving ; but from which as often as not they would drive away, the one to curse him as a swell because he had not laughed at their broadest joke, and the other to mutter against him as a niggard, because the enamelled or jewelled present laid with the bread-roll under their napkin was a shade less costly than what they had desired.

Little Fanfreluche was right.

In other ages the jesters fed on blows and black broth, yet oftentimes loved their princes, and would have died for them had only their jingling bauble been a two-edged sword. But in this age the waggered fools, fed on the fat of the land and drenched

with the choicest of vintages, have none such fealty as this, but rise from their master's board to spit forth venom behind his steps, and ring their bells to chime out his dishonour.





CHAPTER III.

HIS VIEWS ON DINNEERS.

A PROPOS of these Richmond entertainments, I often wondered, by the way, why men, who had their own admirable cooks, and their own elegant abodes, and their own choice selected wines, were so addicted to coming out to dinner at the Star and Garter, or Ship, or any suburban place, that it was fashionable to dine at in this manner.

I often wondered what peculiar attraction existed for them in spending about five times as much on their dinner as it would have cost at home, only for the sake of getting in return a questionable cuisine, lumpy sauces, cold soups, and

and fifth-rate champagnes at exorbitant prices.

I never solved the question ; and I cannot but think the mode is an extraordinary mistake ; a great waste of time and money ; without any adequate quid pro quo.

If I, instead of being a dog, fed at best on scattered crumbs, were a rich man, and a man of influence enough to be able to command whatever society I chose, I should never dine out of my own house.

But if everybody did that, you object, who would there be for guests ? Pooh !—my dear friend, men will never be so equal but what there will always be your gay, courtly, silver-tongued, half-bankrupt, though well-born Martial, who will always be charmed to enjoy the magnificence of Lucan's villa. And if I were Lucan, I would always eat my *cæna* at home.

A dinner is not a thing which should be left to chance. The choice of so delicate a combination as the menu should never be given over to hazard. And now that I am on this topic, forgive me if I add my mite to all that has been already written on the great science of dining.

I have seen a great many dinners in my time,

since that first London season with Beltran. Duchesses', 'actresses', millionnaires', play-wrights', nobles', and bohemians' dinners — I have been present at them all, one time and another, and I cannot forbear from a few remarks on the subject. Dining, or rather giving dinners with success, is an Art. Epicures have recognized this long ago ; but I want it universally recognized.

There is no reason in life why Rus, with only his bottle of old port, and his new-laid eggs, and his plump home-fed pullets, and his sunny apricots, fresh from the warm south wall, and his honey drawn from his own cabbage roses and carnations and white jessamine flowers, and a ruddy-cheeked, clean-handed Phillis, and a shady, leaf-bowered, sweet-scented little chamber, should not study to give an entertainment very charming in its own fashion, quite as well as Urbs, who has his swift, silent, clever men-servants, and his gold plate, and his porcelains costly as gold, and his cook, with the soul of a Carême, and his magnificent pines, and his hot-house grapes, and his wonders of food brought from all ends of Europe, and his perfect wines all of comet years, and his brilliant guests culled from the Legations and the two Houses,

rom White's and the Guards Club, from Brooks' and Boodles'.

The two entertainments will be at the two extremes of the Art, of course ; but there is no reason why they should not both be true Art,—like a Meissonnier and a Poussin.

Lookers-on see the most of the game, they say. Perhaps you will bear with me a moment, whilst I tell you one or two things that I think of your dinners.

They are not anything like what they might be. Here, in London, you have every requisite for the very best dinners ; dinners to call up Brillat Savarin, in ecstasy, from his grave. You have the best wines, you have the best food, you have handsome women, you have clever men, and you never spare any expense : how is it, then, that in London you reiterate the eternal complaint—all of you—that there is no such thing as Society ? It is really very ridiculous ; you ought to be ashamed of the confession.

You echo it one after another ; and yet night after night you go on elbowing each other at assemblies that resemble a crush on a hustings, and crowding together in fashionable mobs at garden-

parties, and you do nothing in the world to remedy the defect.

Now it is a fact—if you don't go to them I can't help that—it is a fact that there are little dinners even in London which are a success, because they are thoroughly enjoyable.

Why are they so ?

Well—one can hardly give a recipe for Society any more than for cooking an omelet. It is not a knowledge to be taught ; it is a thing that comes by nature ; a thing of genius.

They are agreeable, first of all, because they are given out of a genuine design to amuse and be amused, and not merely to ' knock off ' a social duty, and occupy a space in the ' fashionable intelligence.'

Also because they are small enough for the ball of conversation to be tossed lightly, and rapidly, from every hand ; the talk is not therefore a mere buzzing and cross-fire of a score of voices.

Also because the host or hostess has the supreme talent of selection, and also the supreme talent of leading the conversation, unostentatiously, but skilfully ; it is almost as great a talent as that of leading aright at whist. And this also in a manner

must come by nature ; though it may be increased and polished by study.

If you are people who will persist in giving huge 'feeds,' as slang very fittingly styles them, of thirty or forty covers, I cannot hope to instruct you. But if you are open to conviction and willing to give little dinners (one every night if you like) of four, six, or at most eight, guests, just listen to me.

Be firm in rejecting an odiously long menu. A dozen services are quite enough in all reason ; and to risk too great length, is certainly to risk ennui ; a touch of ennui will make your dinner a failure, even though your cook should be a Vatel.

Take heed to have amidst your dishes two or three which, whilst exquisitely prepared, yet shall be perfectly simple and wholesome ; remember that your very choicest bon viveurs are the very people most grateful for a change in this respect, and remember too the great Savarin's eulogy of a larded fowl, which he preferred to all the chickens Fricassée'd, Suprême'd, Marengo'd, Singara'd, or Bordelaise'd, that could be proffered him.

Have a care that your servants are perfectly educated in the science of the wine-book ; so that they may be certain to give the proper

vintage at the proper time, and neither fill the glasses too fast or too seldom. Have your table elegantly appointed, and a fair show of gold or silver to brighten it ; but let your flowers be far more conspicuous than your plate, since they must be far more beautiful, and you do not want your board to look like a great silversmith's shop-window. The most delicate porcelains and the exquisite crystalleries of Clichy or Baccarat may be mingled with advantage ; Majolica or Dresden is too heavy, to my taste, for a dinner-table.

Pray do not follow the ridiculous mode of thinking it *chic* to have everything out of its proper season ; it is never really good ; if you be a real genius you can well afford to abandon the flavourless asparagus of mid-winter and strawberries of Christmas with silent contempt to millionnaires and the demi-monde, who have no other thought than to display their ill-gotten gains.

As regards the number of servants—I think you make a mistake in fancying it is their quantity and not their quality that is of importance. When there are too many they only tread on one another's toes, as they have trod on my tail many a time. A couple of men perfectly trained will do more for the comfort

of your guests than a dozen powdered giants behind the chairs, if the giants be secretly intent on listening for the last new scandal or, afraid of injuring their own dignity by a swift movement.

Unless a servant be as exact as clock-work, and as indifferent to the talk round him as an automaton, he is not worth the tax you pay for him. A servant that I know well would not start if a thunderbolt burst at his feet when he was handing the asparagus, nor give a sign that he heard if a score of Sydney Smiths were doing their best to kill him with laughter as he changed their plates; now *that* man is worth his weight in gold. But there are thousands of footmen who will preserve a decorous aspect of earless and eyeless gravity throughout a dinner; while very many of them are listening and seeing with all their might for all that;—hence they wait badly.

To the good servant his attendance is his art; and he has no thought except to obey its rules absolutely. The most beautiful woman should be sexless, and the most eloquent scandal-monger be tongueless, for aught that he should know or should care. Now, you can make your pattern servant as you can make your standard rose:—

at least, if you be fit to give a good dinner you can.

Of course you will never in future years resort to the hideousness of food set on the table, now that the Russian mode has once taught you how to refine, and, if one may say so, to spiritualize eating. Nor will the grotesque folly of nodding the head over each glass at some neighbour, like a mandarin on a tea-box, in a custom called 'taking wine' (of which I have heard, though it was over-long before my time), ever be revived, it is to be hoped, for nothing can well be more thoroughly absurd. Yet the present system of pouring the same wines in everybody's glass without any seeming remembrance of the exceeding difference in men's wine-palates, is not what it ought to be.

There are men who only like two sorts of wine in one evening; men who like a different vintage with each service; men who like all their wines still; men who abominate certain brands; men who like the French order of precedence for their wines; men who like the English order, which is exactly contrary to it; all those various tastes should be more consulted than they are usually by butlers.

Of course my own race are all Rechabites, there-

fore I treat this question from a purely impersonal point of view. No one, I am happy to say, ever saw a dog drunk ; inebriety is one of those 'superiorities' which you are so naturally proud to claim over us. Men, pigs, ducks, and geese, are the four orders of creatures distinguished by a capacity for drunkenness :—perhaps it is for this reason that they all four make more noise over their own small affairs, a rise in gold, a swill-tub, a caddis worm, or a blade of grass, than any other created thing ever is overheard to do.

But all these, after all, are the merest matters of detail compared with the one essential element of prandial success—*i. e.* the conversation. After all the great account that we make of decoration and of cookery, I have seen two thoroughly enjoyable dinners—one in a little set of chambers where the carte was confined to beef-steaks, oysters, Poméry Gréno and Pichon de Longueville ; and the other in a little fishing inn overhanging a picturesque trout river, where the entire fare consisted of those dainty fish perfectly grilled, and a grand capon, that would have warmed Falstaff's heart, washed down by the sparkling ales of Trent.

But, then, those who dined at the first were

six of the gayest, cleverest, and happiest-tempered people that ever tilted together in a playful tournament of tongues ; and the anglers who laughed over the last were two of the wittiest writers that have ever charmed the world ; a soldier whose silver speech is as lightly brilliant as his deeds of daring are of sternest fame ; and one woman, frank, bright, full of grace and of beauty, a child in her mirth and a queen in her empire.

N.B. Of these four, none were in love ; if only one had 'lost his head,' the harmony of the dinner would have been most probably at an end ; the perfect freedom of it certainly would have been. They were only friends ; in that intimate, pleasant, half-romantic friendship, which only men and women of the highest intelligence can know.

The one great element of success at a dinner is the talk ; and who shall give a recipe as I say for that ?—it is a thing that goes by nature, like the gift of colour and of song.

It is preposterous to say that your men do not talk well. I have heard talk to the full as brilliant and as epigrammatic as anything the cleverest writer can put into the mouths of his imaginary characters. When I hear people protest that in

real life no such witty converse as you find in very witty novels can ever be met, I wonder where these protestants have had the misfortune to live. As I said in my introductory remarks, it is almost as difficult to print the wit one hears as it is to petrify a *soufflée de fécule*, but if you never hear wit in this world—good gracious me!—you must keep very bad company.

I think it is a mistake to think that tremendously clever people are required to obtain radiant conversation. Your very great genius, your very abstruse scholar, is often a very stupid fellow, so far as lingual utterances go. The best men at a dinner are such men as are to be found by the dozen at the best clubs in London ; men of quick intelligence, of good culture, of consummate worldly knowledge, and of just that sparkling, mischievous, pleasant, social wit, which is to conversation what the truffle is to cookery, or the champagne is amongst wines.

These men are to be found, and better companions need never be sought ; true, at some tables they may sit silent, *morne*, and as contemptuous as their politeness permits, but believe me, that is only because at those tables you are boring them :—get them into a congenial atmosphere, their tongues will go, their

mirth sparkle, and their laugh be heard as enjoyably as any one can wish. They *can* be the most amusing companions in the world:—if they are not so with you, it is your fault; you bore them in some way.

Politics you should banish absolutely—if people are not of one mind about them they are sure to quarrel over them; if they *are* of one mind no subject can be drearier. Some little bit of political news, quite fresh from some Legation or some Secretary of State, before the world has heard it, is all that should be admissible.

Any quite fresh scandal is a great relish; especially if you know something about it that no one else knows. Perhaps you had better take heed that the chief of the actors involved are not present; though, indeed, in this age you are all so entirely free from prejudice on these points that (if you be discussing a divorce, for instance) you need not mind the presence of the relatives in the least, scarcely of the husband now-a-days; the only person whose feelings must not be hurt is the co-respondent. Where this last interesting personage is in the plural you had better not invite two of them at the same time; they are sure to have either too much jealousy, or too much compassion, for one another.

Du reste—Don Juan is always a delightful fellow ; and the most amusing guest you can ever obtain, unless indeed it be weighing on his mind that he will have to marry Julia Abbandonata. In which case of course you cannot reasonably expect him to be lively.

If you have not the knack of setting the ball of talk rolling, it is impossible I can impart it to you : one cannot make a good host any more than one can make a great composer : both are born. Still there are a few things which help it. In the first place, there is the care needful in the selection of your guests ; they must suit one another, or you will have discord ; a mingling of classes or of opposite political parties is, I think, a mistake ; men are most at ease in their own caste ; if you introduce an ‘ outsider,’ he or she must be a very brilliant one.

Let your party be of very small number rather than, for sheer sake of enlarging it, introduce the wrong element because you cannot get the right. There is a certain unity of feeling, and common likeness of tone and manner in an Order, still more so in each ‘ set ’ of that ‘ order,’ which is, if made use of, an essential aid to harmony

in itself. It is an infinite ennui to a man to sit next to another who does not catch his allusions flying; it ruins conversation when one person outside the pale fails to understand all that is cause for mirth or for chat within it.

Likewise, you should be very careful not to let any topic get worn threadbare; the instant it is getting the least bit of a bore, sweep it away with the brisk besom of a fresh and welcome subject.

A little scandal is, as I say, an excellent thing; nobody is ever brighter or happier of tongue than when he is making mischief of his neighbour; but it is a two-edged sword that requires very dainty handling; and all caps of slander unluckily fit so very many heads, that you must be heedful how you select them.

If it be a party of both sexes, ask people that are *a little* in love with each other, for people a little in love are always eager to shine; but banish all *grandes passions*; they have an eloquence of their own indeed, but they are very stupid society at a dinner table.

And now, if you be a woman, let me offer you one piece of advice, though I know you will never follow it—DON'T THINK OF YOURSELF. Re-

sign your pet flirtation *pro tempo*; don't care for 'making play' even with your favourite lover. Do not indulge your own palate, nor meditate on your own dress; let your heart and soul be with your guests, let your whole mind be given to the guidance and the surveillance of the conversation. Remember that your dinner is your campaign; and that on your skilful direction depends your victory.

But then withal you must be quite at ease, and not in the least pre-occupied, or your influence will be nil; you must be always gay, alert, suave, ready to skim over a difficulty, to supply an hiatus, and to prevent a pause; you must lead with radiance and with tact, and yet you must be perfectly willing not to shine, and to let your powers lie *perdu* if your guests are in full career without you, and if your self-assertion would be their interruption.

Do you think this all very hard?

Well, my dear, if it were ten times harder, would you not have your reward when men should declare that your dinners were the most charming in London?

One last word,—leave the table early, and do not grudge the men their half-hour of solitude. Nay, send them cigars and a *chasse* to prolong it! A

trial to you, I know—but they like it; don't you believe them if they tell you they don't. They may call it a 'barbarous custom;' but it is one that they relish exceedingly; as they do many other 'barbarities;' their vices to wit; and you will be all the more successful as a dinner-giver if you have the sense in you to see this.

The most charming woman will be only wise if she take fully into her mind the conviction that too much even of herself may be a bore.

I don't know what more I can tell you; one cannot make a dinner-giver as I have said, any more than one can make a Michael Angelo. I am half afraid, too, that you English—despite your repute for hospitality—have not the genius of entertainment in you. You are far too self-conscious and you are seldom light-hearted enough.

If I were to tell you, also, all that I have heard your guests, when they have got out in the night air, and had their cigars fairly in their mouths, say of dinners that you had thought quite perfection, you would not believe me. There is nowhere such a thorough-going sceptic as a man or woman who disbelieves in his or her own shortcomings.

So I will not weary you longer on the subject;

as I can hardly hope to improve you ; even if you have not skipped this chapter in my memoirs, which is probable. Let me only paraphrase a famous saying, and add :

‘ Montres-moi ton menu, je te montrerai ton cœur.’





CHAPTER IV.

HE STUDIES THE STAGE.

FLEARNED many wondrous things betwixt Epsom and Ascot. A brief space, indeed, yet one that to me seemed longer than the whole of my previous life, so crowded was its every hour with new and marvellous experiences. Worldly experiences, I mean. Intellectually, I am not sure that I acquired much.

Indeed, to a little brain teeming with memories of the Théâtres Beaumarchais, Voltaire, Molière, Feuillet, Sardou, Sandeau, &c., &c., which I had heard read so continually at the Dower-house amongst the Fens, the views of dramatic literature held at the Coronet appeared of the most extraor-

dinary character. They certainly had one merit—simplicity.

The verb 'to steal,' was the only one that a successful dramatic author appeared to be required to conjugate.

For your music steal from the music halls ; for your costumes steal from Le Follet ; for your ideas steal from anybody that happens to carry such a thing about him ; for your play, in its entirety, steal the plot, the characters, the romance, the speeches, and the wit, if it have any, of some attractive novel ; and when you have made up your parcel of thefts tie it together with some string of stage directions, herald it as entirely original, give a very good supper to your friends on the press, and bow from your box as the ' Author.'

You will certainly be successful : and if the novelist ever object, threaten him with an action for interference with *your* property.

These I found were the laws laid down by London dramatists ; and they assuredly were so easy to follow, and so productive to obey, that if any Ben Jonson, or Beaumarchais, Sheridan, or Marivaux, had arisen and attempted to infringe them, he would have infallibly been regarded as a very evil

example, and been extinguished by means of journalistic slating and stall-sifflage.

Beltran had indeed now and then imperilled the peace and prosperity of his Coronet by certain forms of opposition to this quiet régime of uninterrupted theft. Once, I heard, he had actually lost some hundred pounds by relinquishing a piece at the day before its production, because he found out that it was a piracy from a novel, and that the novelist had an antiquated prejudice against being robbed.

Also, when a piece was taken from the French, he had the weakness not only to pay the Frenchman for doing him the honour to use his creation, but actually had 'translated and adapted from the French original' printed in his programmes and advertisements; a ridiculous concession to truth, which kept his house half empty—the English public naturally fearing pollution from so unnaturally unadulterated an article.

But Beltran was quite an exception amongst lessees; and it was no wonder that all the Town by the voices of its prophets declared for once unanimously, that he must be ruined in a twelve-month. Indeed, they said it was only the wisdom

of Dudley Moore and little Lance that had saved him from destruction hitherto.

‘What’s that new piece you have advertised, Vere?’ asked Paget Albermarle, at one of the Sunday breakfasts.

‘This,’ answered Beltran, tossing over to him a paper-covered book.

‘*La Péch  de Vivienne*,’ read Albermarle, ‘and you call it “Vivia’s Secret.” What sort of a thing is it?’

‘Oh, a glorious piece,’ said Denzil, lifting his head. ‘I saw it in Paris a month ago, with the Desaix in it. A terrible piece; strong and noble, and full of a curious kind of poetry, and of a wonderful power. Desaix looks superb in it, too. She is a grand woman. But you never mean to say you are going to bring it out, Beltran?’

‘We are going to turn it into English for the Coronet,’ answered Leo Lance, striking into the conversation. ‘It is wonderfully effective, as you say. We shall have to shorten it, make it three acts; and it will be more of a drama than a tragedy, of course. There’s no time for a long play before the burlesque.’

Denzil shuddered very visibly.

‘A drama—three acts—one knows what that means! Good heavens, Vere! How came you to decide on the thing before I came back? I could have told you that you haven’t a creature in your company capable of giving the *Péché de Vivienne*.’

Beltran lifted his brow wearily.

‘You were at Nice, and we wanted something; we have been doing this old legitimate business too long; Lance suggested this play, and thought that it read very well!’

‘Of course it read very well! It is the finest thing they have had over there since *Marion Delorme*. It is a tremendous tragedy, I tell you,—and you have vulgarized it by this atrocious title already!’

‘Mr Lance is an excellent adapter,’ put in the quiet sonorous voice of the great editor of the *Midas*. ‘He always filters so well, that no residuum of the original genius ever appears.’

The hapless Mouse coloured and fidgeted where he sat; but he never dared to resent the sharpest thrusts of this great censor.

‘I intend to adhere quite closely to the French play,’ he muttered sullenly. ‘It will only be slightly shortened; I shall hardly change the text at all.’

'Then you may withdraw the piece after its first night, Vere,' said Dudley Moore serenely.

'Don't you like it?' asked Beltran.

'Like it!' echoed Dudley Moore. 'How is that the question? It is a very clever play; very clever, though I am scarcely so enthusiastic on its merits as Denzil. But it is a play simply unproducible in England.'

'Oh, nonsense!' cried Denzil; 'how is it worse than dozens we give?—the poor woman never sins but once, and that under such circumstances, and with such agonies of remorse, that the moral is the finest possible. There's not an indecent line in the tragedy; it is only fearfully human and real.'

Dudley Moore shrugged his shoulders.

'You write for the English Public, and don't know them better than *that*!'

'Than what?'

The editor closed his cynical mouth, and entirely refused to say.

'Than to suppose that they like what is human and real, he means,' said Beltran. 'They don't care the least about that; they like a little broad farce, a little rough murder, and a little rosewater sentiment: anything more bothers them. They can't understand it.'

‘Then why in heaven’s name fritter away on them a grand play like this?’ cried Denzil.

‘Can’t be helped now. Lance has begun it, and the announcements are out.’

‘And who is to play Vivienne?’

‘Maude Delamere, of course.’

‘What? A character almost as awful as Phædre, and quite as desolate as Antigone, represented by a graceful coquette in point lace and pearls, who will take poison as sweetly as if it were a cup of coffee, and will die with elaborate care not to tumble her train? Preposterous!’

‘Blaze away, Derry,’ said Beltran resignedly. ‘But the thing’s settled. There’s only one question: to keep to the story or not. Old Wynch will have it that it won’t do.’

‘Old Wynch knows his world,’ said Dudley Moore. ‘Of course you must change the story, in its chief incident. Indeed, I don’t see that Mr Lance need acknowledge any indebtedness to his original; he will only appropriate the main idea, all the characters, as much of the passion as he dare use, and all the wit that he can contrive to translate. *Si peu de chose!*—not worth a reference.’

The poor Mouse moved uneasily.

‘My intention was,’ he murmured, ‘to have given the piece quite as it stands ; love and all.’

‘What ! with the susceptibilities of the British Public !’ said Dudley Moore. ‘They never stand any nonsense with the seventh commandment, remember. You must change the illicit love into a decorous bigamy. Indeed, you might try trigamy. They wouldn’t at all mind three husbands.’

‘Bigamy !’ sighed the adopter. ‘They never have enough of *that*—’

‘No. The English conscience is so intensely mercantile, that it has no notion of a passion that does not result in the cheating of somebody,’ said Denzil, taking aim at me with a coffee bonbon. Bigamy is fraud ; and the fraud commends it to the public of these very commercial Isles. But it will ruin all the symmetry of the piece ; it will entirely destroy its purport. It will make it altogether witless, senseless, absurd. It will neither have point nor intention ; neither meaning nor object !’

‘No sort of objections to it on the stage those,’ answered Dudley Moore, quietly. ‘*You* ought to be well aware of this, Mr Lance ; you have had theatrical successes !’

Little Lance winced, as he usually did, beneath the great censor's flagellations.

'It is different with this,' he muttered, half apologetically. 'Denzil is right. You see,—it's really very grand in the original; a great sin, and a great repentance, and all that; symmetrical, you know; really artistic; and if one has to change it into bigamy it will just be vulgarized and brutalized, that's all!'

'Precisely,' said Dudley Moore, still in the most affable manner. 'We want something to attract a London fashionable audience;—don't we?'

'Don't go in for a dramatic conscience, Mouse,' said Beltran; 'it's too late in the day,—all that sort of thing.'

'You have had one, my dear Vere,' said Dudley Moore. 'I think, on the whole, you have spent more on it than on your racehorses?'

'The deuce I have,' murmured Beltran. 'Take your own way, Lance, if you like—'

'Only,' the censor interrupted, 'you won't have a week's run if you do. With Lady Frederic just bolted for the third time, and Lady Stevenham coming into the D. C. with her amatory four-in-

hand, the Aristocracy will be infinitely too virtuous to look at a heroine who sins *once*, and then repents !’

Beltran laughed a little : the world had added his name to those of Lady Stevenham’s favoured quartette, and he knew well enough that he had only waltzed twice with the woman, and scarcely thought about her as often.

‘I’d chance that,’ he made answer. ‘The thing is—that French part is an awfully strong one, and I’ve nobody strong enough for it, if we render it as it stands.’

‘There’s always the Delamere ?’

‘Pshaw ! Maude Delamere is a very pretty creature, and drapes herself uncommonly well, but she could no more give the passion of that French play than she could do you Phædre in the original.’

‘No,’ assented Dudley Moore. ‘Mrs Delamere acts very gracefully, and dresses very charmingly, and is one of the few Englishwomen that can carry a Cashmere ; but she is Mrs Delamere in every part that she plays, and if I saw her in Lady Macbeth I should expect to see her with her fan, and her eye-glass, her black guipure lace, and her afternoon tea.’

‘To be sure! The perfection of an actress is to get out of herself; and none of ours ever do that.’

‘They’re too fond of themselves.’

‘That’s just it. They’re a set of nice-looking women who dress well, and look well, and—never forget it!’

‘The greatest actress I ever saw,’ put in Denzil, ‘was a little Jewess of Cordova. She had no sort of beauty; she was small and yellow; she had nothing in the world but those wonderful Israel eyes, and a voice like a silver cymbal. And, yet—what a genius that creature was! She was only playing in a wretched Spanish theatre, just for the populace; but I went night after night to see her. It was marvellous! That woman could reach every passion and every pain in human nature. She was transfigured, metamorphosed, the moment the fury of art got into her. She would give you anything:—an old man dying of wretchedness, a young girl wild with first love, a miser gloating over his gold, a homeless child heartsick and lost, a forsaken mistress burning for vengeance, a discrowned queen daunting a mob, a murderess stealing to slaughter, a maiden blushing over sweet shame,—that creature *was* them all, one after another, as she would. You

never saw *her* at all. You only saw the thing that she chose to create.'

'Nothing short of that is genius,' said Dudley Moore briefly. 'The only great actress is a woman whom you utterly forget in the impersonation that she chooses you to see. The actresses we are blessed with are always making us think—how well A looks to-night, how intricate B's coiffure is, how becoming that tawny satin is to C, and how resplendent are D's diamonds!'

'What did you let that Jewess slip for, Derry?' asked Beltran.

'Well—I shouldn't have let her slip. It's years ago now; but I had half a mind to take her over to Paris or London just on the chance. It seemed atrocious that such transcendent gifts as these should be wasted on muleteers, and water-carriers, and olive-pickers. But just about three weeks after I had first seen her act in a comedy of Calderon's she was killed—killed horribly, gored to death in the streets, by a circus-bull that had broken loose from his drivers maddened with the midnight-glare and the tumult of the people. I didn't see her die, thank God.'

He said it so simply, and so touchingly, that

there was silence for a moment in the chamber.

‘It is always so!’ said Dudley Moore at last, with a plaintive *pitié de soi même*! ‘These dear Delameres, who are of no earthly artistic use, always live on and on, till good dinners and too much champagne destroy the only symmetry they possess—that of form. And a creature of genius, like this Jewess of yours, is always killed by a bull, or a fever, or a bit of orange peel on the pavement, or something that is blundering and bizarre!’

‘Mrs D’Eyncourt had some genius, eh?’ said Beltran.

‘No,’ Denzil answered rather coldly. ‘She was a woman of beauty, and of talent; but she was by no means a genius.’

‘No,’ said Dudley Moore. ‘I remember her very well; a splendid woman, but she had not genius. I doubt if any Englishwoman ever has; I cannot call one to mind. Your great feminine intelligences have all been Italian or French, and your great feminine actresses all Jewesses. An Englishwoman is never impersonal enough, nor sympathetic enough, for real genius. With her “the great I is the measure of the universe.”’

‘There was Mrs Siddons?’ hazarded Denzil.

Dudley Moore took snuff.

‘I have grave doubts of Mrs Siddons. She was a goddess of the age of fret and fume, of stalk and strut, of trilled R’s and of nodding plumes. If we had Siddons now, I fear we should hiss; I am quite sure we should yawn. She must have been Melpomene always; Nature never.’

‘You are very hard to please!’ said Denzil.

‘I never am pleased,’ responded the great Censor meekly.

‘Well, let us finish about the piece,’ interposed Beltran. ‘Is it to be a fine play badly acted, or a bad play decently acted? It must be one or the other.’

‘Oh, the bad play, of course,’ decided Dudley Moore. ‘Your women always dress well, and build their hair in the latest fashion; so long as you do that, the Public won’t mind what words they hear so long as they are not words that fly utterly over their heads. Your people always look good style; and if the play’s tolerably silly they’ll be strong enough for it.’

‘I wish they heard you!’

‘They have heard me—fifty times. But it don’t make any difference. They stare at the stalls, while they talk of the moon, and they keep an eye on the

Times critic as they writhe in their death agony.'

'You wish this thing made irrational and stupid then?' asked Beltran, stirring the leaves of the French play-book.

'I wish you to have a success, my dear fellow—yes.'

Beltran laughed a little.

'Well—do as he tells you, Mouse. He knows best. Don't make the stalls yawn, whatever you do, that's all.'

'They won't yawn,' said Dudley Moore confidently; 'not if they find there is going to be bigamy early enough in the first act, and if you transform that grand old priest of the Paris piece into a Yankee elder from the Salt Springs, or a pedagogue of the Busby type.'

Denzil ruefully drew caricatures with his pencil on the paper cover of the *Péché de Vivienne*, and heard in silence.

'What does that mean, Derry?' asked his friend, construing the silence into disapproval.

Denzil flung his pen into the fire.

'It means—that I'd either have something like Art in the house, or—I'd shut the place up altogether!'

‘Art!’ echoed Beltran impatiently. ‘Where’s the use of talking about Art? The Company won’t play it, and the Public won’t come to it.’

‘Well—shut the house up, then.’

‘And turn those forty pair of fine legs out of work? For shame, Denzil,’ said Dudley Moore. ‘What a churl you must be to put such thoughts in his head. The piece will do admirably. Don’t mind his nonsense, Mr Lance. You change the play, as I say: and if Worth makes for Mrs Delamere, and somebody puts her in good humour by sending her some new jewels; and Beltran invites a dozen of the right men to dinner on the first night; and if those new scent fountains play in the private boxes and on the staircases; and if the plot is carefully confused so that none of the pressmen can make head or tail of it, and thus are driven back in despair to praise the dresses and the drawing-room sets for which your theatre is always distinguished, why—I will undertake to say that you will have a good run all through the season!’

‘Yes!’ laughed Beltran, ‘and the next week’s edition of the *Midas* will take “Vivia’s Secret” as an example of the utter degeneracy and absolute foolishness of the English stage in the Victorian era!’

‘Ah! that may be,’ said the editor placidly. ‘But, my dear Vere, if my advice fill your house, my staff may well be allowed to cut up your actors. If you let them murder a fine piece, would you be any the safer from the *Midas*?—even though the emptiness of your theatre made you *look* for once like high Art?’

‘That’s a fact!’ sighed Beltran. ‘Well—fire away, Mouse. As it’s to be all dresses and drawing-room sets, it can’t tax your brains over-much.’

The Mouse obeyed: and three weeks later ‘Vivia’s Secret’ was brought out and became the talk of the town:—Mrs Delamere’s dresses were pronounced divine; the cabinets in the salon scene were really of marqueterie; one of the scenes was a real luncheon, with real champagne cup and real things to eat; the carpet on the stage was a genuine Aubusson; gallons of perfume danced away every night in the fountains; the plot was profoundly incomprehensible; the action delightfully rapid; and every one had the pleasure of feeling that the heroine was as immoral as possible, yet that by a judicious dual use of the marriage service she admirably contrived to avoid shocking the most delicate susceptibilities.

Dudley Moore chuckled : and a stinging satire on it duly appeared in the *Midas*. But the satire only sent people more eagerly to the box office of the Coronet, and had no other appreciable effect.

Indeed, this Angléicized version of ' *La Péch  de Vivienne* ' was so entirely successful that the stalls were filled, even before the burlesque : an unprecedented occurrence which, as Fanfreluche told me, rendered Laura Pearl's temper absolutely unbearable, and caused her to break her ivory hair-brush upon her maid's shoulders.





CHAPTER V.

LA REINE COCOTTE.

THE theatre was one of my greatest amusements.

I soon understood the fascination which that peculiar form of ruin possesses for men, and the attraction that draws you nobles and gentry to play the part of *impresario*.

Your wares are pretty women ; your business is amusement ; your patronage is extensive ; your society is of that easy sort which lets you keep your hat on your head ; smoke with your female companions ; show you are bored when you feel so ; and wear your shooting-coat in the drawing-room both actually and allegorically.

All that is disagreeable in it—all the agreements with male players, all the ill tempers of female ones, all the debit and credit accounts, all the law difficulties with irate authors, and all the practical worries of the whole thing, you can entirely delegate to your acting manager, whose name alone appears before the public. To be sure, for this form of diversion you will be likely to lose your entire fortune in something less than three years: but then, as in many of your pursuits—the turf or the cards to wit—it is quite possible to lose it in three days, or even three hours, this objection is hardly to be urged against amateur-lesseeship for a moment. It is true also that you will get tired of it very soon; and that then you will find its nets so cleverly woven around you that you will be unable to get out of them. But this, again, is so universal a characteristic of all your pleasures in which women are concerned, that it is scarcely worth while to mention it against theatres in particular.

It is further true that, after amusing the public for several seasons, after benefiting a great number of human beings by your employment of them, after behaving very generously and charitably in hard winters to your poorer employés, after honestly

doing your best to bring something like Art on the stage, and after seeing your ancestral acres melted in an actress's diamonds, and your manager and treasurer retire with a villa and an easy competence—you will be within an ace of your entire ruin, and will be condemned by society in toto as a roué, a brute, and an idiot.

But—if you do not mind these little trifles—to play at being an *impresario* is perhaps the best fun there is out. You are in all things like the mover of the automaton chess-player hidden beneath the table, and laughing in your sleeve to hear the silly crowds agape with wonder at your marionettes. There is only this difference: the chess-automaton is honest and don't take his master's money;—*your* automata, when they see that the game is all up, will make a clear sweep of the board before you have touched a brass coin.

These reflections, however, did not trouble me; nor Beltran either. There was plenty of money then, whatever there would be afterwards; and the Coronet, with all that appertained to it, was in its way very amusing.

The *sous les cartes* of everything always is amusing. Pardon this ungrammatical jumble of

two languages; in my time I have associated with so many English adapters of Parisian plays!

There was plenty of diversion; as for the virtues—I suppose you don't look for them very often in a green room. Yet you might sometimes—and find them.

'There goes the biggest fool in all London,' said Lord Brune one morning, as he watched Beltran pass down St James's Street.

'Eh?' asked Paget Desmond in amaze; being given to thinking his friend one of the keenest-witted men on the town, in which indeed he was right.

'The *very* biggest fool,' averred Lord Brune solemnly. 'Do you know the last thing that he's done?'

'Last thing? No.'

'Well—just this. Know woman that played mother's part in *Vivia's Secret* all first month?—ugly beggar, yellow, gray-haired, and all the rest—woman not worth sixpence?'

'Yes—broke her leg last week in the street. Had to get substitute.'

'Exactly. Well—her boy came crying to Beltran; little wretch, eight or nine; said his mother'd

sent him to say she must give up the part for good and all ; leg was broke above knee, and she couldn't stir for six months—if ever. Boy made a beast of a row, bellowing. They'd nothing at all to live on. What do you think that ass has done? I got it out of old Wynch. Continued her salary, by Jove ;—and had her and the boy sent down to the sea, and all the rest of it, at his cost! A woman as ugly as sin, too!'

And Lord Brune went out of Brooks's in immeasurable disgust.

A few hours later, I heard some other men ask Beltran what had become of the old actress that broke her leg in the street.

'How should I know?' he answered them. 'Nobody ever does know what becomes of old women. Women oughtn't, by rights, to live at all after forty : we never look at 'em later than that.'

'They go to work-houses, I suppose?' suggested Fred Orford, with that sort of vague, pensive curiosity with which a connoisseur wonders where all the ordinary china that he only uses for coffee, and does not care to catalogue, goes.

'I suppose they do,' said Beltran. 'It don't much matter. We've done with 'em.'

And if he had known that old Wynch had betrayed him to Lord Brune, he would have been much more seriously angered than if he had discovered the gravest of that worthy's secret speculations.

About his faults or his follies people might chatter till they were tired, for aught that he cared ; but for his better deeds he had an almost morbid horror and avoidance of publicity.

' I don't believe you are so bad as people think, Vere,' said Lady Otho Beaujolais to him one day ; she was a pretty creature with whom he had that sort of pleasant harmless platonic which are so common to the present period.

He shrugged his shoulders.

' Don't you, dear ? Well, pray don't say so.'

As for Laura Pearl, of course she always took him at his word,—being a woman incapable of any sort of insight into such a character as his,—and I think that his greatest attraction for her lay in the fact that she thought him the incarnation of human heartlessness.

I saw her often.

I never saw her without marvelling by what spells she induced a man of his temper and his

tastè to endure association with her own coarse, cruel, and mindless life ; by what sorcery of personal beauty she persuaded him to forget her ignorance, her brutality, and her avarice.

From the first moment that the blaze of her splendid auburn eyes had flashed over me, I had been pursued by vague memories to which I hardly dared give shape and name. From the first hour in which I had beheld her covered with rubies, at the head of her banqueting table, I had been ceaselessly haunted by a fancy that took entire possession of me.

For the accent of the moors and the dales rang in her voice ; the scent of the old pinewoods seemed to come to me as she flung her perfumed hair upon the wind ; when she gazed on the shining stones of priceless girdles, carbuncle-studded, there was in her eyes the look I had seen given at the ‘ dimonds ’ of Dick o’ the Wynnats’ pack ; and when there floated in the gaslights the golden and gossamer tissues of her stage attire, they half veiled, and half revealed, the same form that I had used to behold imprisoned in the russet garb of a ragged linsey as the whiteness and the softness of the almond are shut in by their brown fibrous shell.

I felt sure—and yet I doubted.

The conjuror Gold can baffle even a dog's keen scent and faultless memory.

At last one day I knew.

There was a theatrical question that had brought them all down to the house in the forenoon—a question of whether they should or should not accept Mrs Delamere's *ultimatum*, which was to have her salary doubled at once or to withdraw from the company altogether. She was entirely wrong legally, but as *Vivia* was then at the height of its first success, and as *Vivia* without Mrs Delamere would have been in racing parlance nowhere, and as that lady, if coerced into keeping her engagement to the letter, was perfectly capable of breaking it in the spirit by acting so sullenly and so badly that the audience would have been driven away in ennui and disgust, she obtained her own terms in full triumph.

The cabinet council had broken up; a note had been despatched to Maude Delamere, couched in terms to satisfy the utmost exactions of that capricious beauty; Beltran, Denzil, and the rest had gone their own ways; and I, by a stroke of ill-fortune, had got accidentally locked up in that

famous supper-room, which served also as council-chamber.

I knew there was no chance of escape till they came again in the evening, which one or other of them was certain to do, and I composed myself dolefully to slumber away the dulness of the intervening time. An hour might have elapsed when, to my pleasure, I heard a key turn in the door, I thought; it might be some servant whom Beltran, missing, had sent for, me.

Instead, I saw Laura Pearl.

How had she entered?—he believed that he alone could open that room, as he had had affixed to the door a steel lock of very complicated Italian workmanship, of which he possessed the sole key. I presume she must have had a skeleton key made, and that his antique fastener was not of such mysterious manufacture as he supposed.

She entered, admitted old Wynch after her, and closed the door with her key.

‘Get to business,’ she said curtly, seating herself by the table.

He seated himself opposite; and obeyed.

Unperceived, where I was curled up on one of the couches, I listened in horror.

The wicked old man, with as dry and simple a commercial exactitude as though he dealt of groceries or calicoes, detailed to her the various matters in which he was her pander, accomplice, and financier.

Appointments; intrigues; gifts of jewellery; letters of flattery or of folly; careful audits of how much gold such and such poor fools would yield before their final ruin; elaborate estimates as to the probable value of so much gilded youth caught in the toils;—all these he laid before her in what seemed a sort of custom of periodical auditory, received her instructions, and proffered his advice, having in all between them but two simple objects:—to make money, and to cheat men.

She listened attentively; answered with that curious shrewdness which often accompanies complete intellectual ignorance; thrust the presents and the letters into her carriage bag to be examined at leisure, and began and ended the conference with that good-humour and brevity which perfect harmony between two confederates alone can bring about.

As Avice Dare had conspired with the Pedlar of the Peak, so did Laura Pearl conspire with the Pandarus of the Town.

As her solitary object then, had been the amassing of silver and the betrayal of her brother; so her solitary object now, was the amassing of gold and the betrayal of her lover.

It is a terrible thing to corrupt a woman—ay, so it is,—but it is a more terrible thing when Nature has made a woman so corrupt that no Fiend, if there were one, could teach her aught of evil.

She dismissed him at last, carelessly, but good-humouredly, as a clever workman lays down a clever tool.

‘I forgot one thing,’ said the old man, returning a pace or two. ‘The woman in Shoreditch wants ten shillings a week for the boy. She says now he is over three years, she cannot afford to keep him for six.’

She listened with an angry gloom on her face.

‘Ten shillings is a deal for the keep of a brat,’ she muttered, turning round and round on her finger a sapphire ring, worth a king’s ransom in the old days when kings were deemed things of worth.

‘So it is,’ said old Wynch, drily, with a gleam of humour in him. ‘It is almost as much as the keep of a parrot!’

The sarcasm passed by her, unfelt.

‘He’s sure to go on living, I suppose?’ she asked sullenly.

‘Well—yes,’ said the old man with a smile. ‘Some children will, you know; I suppose bad air, and sour milk, and mouldy bread, and bruised flesh, and the stench of those bone-boiling places, agree with ’em. Seems as if they did.’

‘What do you mean? I’m sure the woman’s good enough to him,’ she answered sharply, as if a momentary touch of conscience smote her.

‘Oh, very good,’ said the old treasurer, with his queer smile. ‘She’s so fond of children; she’s got thirty all in one attic to take care of; she’s a true Christian, that woman. Shall I say she shall have the ten shillings a week?—if a child dies when it is out to nurse, it is always a nasty business. There are inquiries and a great deal of nonsense talked about “neglect,” and “abandonment,” and all that.’

‘Very well. She shall have the ten,’ she said reluctantly. ‘But not a farthing more, mind;—not never.’

‘I’ll tell her so,’ said Wynch: and he went out with a pleasant-spoken farewell.

Laura Pearl remained behind him, locking herself in, and spelling through some of the notes, and testing some of the gems she had received, through the good offices of this unlovely Mercury of sixty years.

She had made at least a score of rendezvous,—one at her milliner's; one at her florist's; one in Kensington Gardens; one in Richmond Park; one in the coffee-room of the Leviathan; one in this very room of the *Coronet*. And to preserve them all from collision or misadventure, and above all, to time and arrange them so that none of them should be known to Beltran, required as much ingenuity and precision as your betting-book requires from you.

It is true, she had one great thing to help her: she knew all his ways and hours and habits, and through her spies and his servants knew quite well all his movements when he was away from her.

Men object to the surveillance of a wife, and most justly; but they seem to forget that it is nothing compared to the unscrupulous espionage of a courtesan.

She was some little time occupied in arranging her book of engagements; for though she seemed to have a system of marks and crosses that she herself

understood, all usage of pen or pencil appeared strange and awkward to her.

This business at length completed, she shut up her morocco bag, and took her burnous from the chair, to depart: doing this she saw me for the first time, and caught me up with a quick gesture of dislike; no doubt to torment me in my master's absence.

The sun was shining strongly through the window by which my couch stood, and, as she seized me, the light gleamed on that little ring of white metal, that Ambrose of the Forge had graven with my name, and which I still wore about my throat.

It caught her sight for the first time.

She grew suddenly pale,—for she had no need of rouge upon her rich and ruddy skin,—and the blood came and went strangely in her face. She stared intensely at me, spelt the letters on my collar slowly, over and over and over, then flung me from her, as though I were an asp.

‘It’s the pup!’ she muttered, as she sank down into the great curved chair. ‘It’s the beast of a pup!—I might have known it!’

Lying where she had thrown me, I grew deadly cold,—I also knew her now.

For a second, in her hard splendid eyes, there was a look of craven fear, of troubled memories. No living creature is without some conscience ; and the fangs of recollection bit now into hers, so sharply, that they aroused it, for an instant, from its gold-drugged sleep.

‘ Poor Ben ! Poor Ben ! ’ she muttered. ‘ Be he alive, I wonder ? ’

Perhaps she had never thought of him from the time that she had betrayed him until now. It seemed so.

For the instant remembrance held her in its thrall. Beholding the little creature whom she had sold into bondage that she herself might escape to the liberty of sin, she saw again the sheltering rose-thorn, the dark mournful yews, the open cottage door, with the brown brook running on its way, the soft peaceful purple hills, the blue kingfisher perched beside the pool, the deep green wood with all the sunlight quivering through, the tender homely face of the man she had betrayed.

The dead time had no beauty for her—oh no. These women are but ashamed that ever they were innocent ; they are but fevered and enraged to know that the days ever were when they were poor,

and lowly, and of no account. It had been abhorred by her when it had been her present : it was loathed by her now that it had become her past.

Yet in a sense it smote her ; for a brief space her conscience thrilled with life. Yet not strongly, nor for long.

She shook her hand in the light till it flashed in every facet of her gleaming rings ; she looked at her reflection in the old silver mirror of Venice, that was opposite her : she cast down her eyes, and gazed upon the diamond locket that rested upon her breast under the soft silks and laces of her dress :—and she laughed. The same laugh, with which, tossing her arms above her head, she had beheld herself the mistress of the mock jewels of the old pedlar of the Peak.

‘I ha’ done well,’ she cried aloud, in the silence, her native accent strong in her voice in that moment of excitement. ‘I ha’ done well! If ony Nell o’ Moor Farm could see me now!’

Then she thrust her foot against me, and spurned me to the farther end of the chamber, and passed out and away to her carriage.

I heard the shiver of her silk robes on the stairs of the theatre ; I heard the chime of her ponies’

sleigh-bells through the open window ; I heard the rush and roll of the wheels as she dashed down the stone-paved street ; and I knew now whence it came, that instinct of terror and aversion which had possessed me ; I knew now whence they rose, those memories wherewith her voice, and her eyes, and her cruel beauty had been so strangely weighted for me.

For this woman was indeed Avice Dare.

Perchance it might be urged she would have never found her way to gilded wickedness, had not the old pedlar of the Wynnats first thrown open the door of temptation.

Well,—perhaps not ; she would only have wedded Ambrose of the Forge or some other honest-hearted toiler of the woods and moors ; and merely dishonoured a name that was of no account, in the brutal orgies of drunken miners and herdsmen ; and only have dwelt, in sullen discontent and savage repining, in a little lowly cottage that her passions, and her sloth, and her violence should have made a hell to her husband and children. She would have done less injury indeed, because her sphere would have been the village on the moor-land instead of the cities of the world. She would only have broken a poor labourer's peace instead of a

score of rich men's fortunes. She would only have been a ragged tipsy virago at an alehouse instead of a splendid cocotte, who swept nobles and gentlemen at will into her net. She would only have been the curse of one unhappy man, about whose neck her sin and shame would have been hung for ever like a mill-stone, instead of being as now the Circe, into whose fell power there were gathered high names, and proud titles, and fair lands, and lordly honours, to be devoured, or destroyed, or levelled with the swine, or stripped and made a mock of as she would.

Oh no—there would have only been the common tale of a wretched cottage home, and a female drunkard, and children who quoted 'mother' as authority and example for all evil doing, and a woman losing all likeness of her sex through sullen hatred and through dull debauch. Only that.

Imprisoned in the cage of obscurity and poverty, this kite could only have struck gloomily and hungrily at such poor feeble worthless mice, and larks, and night-moths, and other home-bred things to which her native moor had given life. Loosed to full flight, she could pursue all birds of rarest plumage that spread their golden wings out to the

sunlight of a glad fair fate ; could tear the breast feathers of the proudest falcon that ever flew ; and could dip her thirsty beak into the heart's blood of a score wild, happy, thoughtless, heedless pigeons, slaughtered on a summer's day to yield her sport an hour.

But would she herself have been more innocent ? Not one whit.

If you want a truth (which is not very likely, for it is a ware that is never saleable), take this truth : a woman guilty for the sake of gold would be guilty without gold for sheer love of guilt. When Mephistopheles finds that he can tempt Gretchen with jewels, he is a fool for his pains : he might know that he has wasted his money ; she would have been sure to have come to his realm of her own accord,—unasked.





CHAPTER VI.

THE WOOD-ELF.

ONE evening towards the close of the season a misfortune chanced to me. I was lost.

Beltran went down to speak at the Lords—a thing that he scarce ever troubled himself to do,—and I, following him without his knowledge, got divided from him in the maze of streets about those legislative Houses of yours whose architecture will last just about as long as the laws passed in them will endure—perhaps even a little longer, gimcrack though the architecture be.

I was sorely grieved and frightened, of course, and ran, and ran, and ran, wildly hither and thither; not knowing any better, and getting under the feet

of the horses, and losing all my senses in the din and press.

It was quite late, also, and night, although a midsummer night, was coming on apace. I could have found my right road if left to myself; but you always put as many obstacles in the way of a dog's return to his home as in the way of a man's or woman's return to honesty and virtue.

Boys hooted at me; cabmen swore at me; girls chased me; and cats spit at me; and terrified, blinded, and deafened with the noise and the pursuit, I had no other thought than to rush away and away at my topmost speed, eluding every grasp, until at length, fairly exhausted, I was caught by the gentle hand of a girl. It stopped me, and stroked me tenderly, so that my terrors were stilled.

'Poor little thing,' she said in a very soft voice that had in it the sound of extreme youth, almost of childhood. 'Poor little thing. Stay with me.'

It was so dark in the little narrow street into which I had unconsciously darted, that I could not see her features; but her touch and her tone reassured me; and I let her lift me in her arms and caress me.

‘We are both stray,’ she murmured. ‘You seem like a little friend.’

Then I felt her tears fall on my forehead, and by dusky moonlight I saw that she bore in her other arm a sheaf of sweet country flowers,—blue-bells and moss-roses, and other tender homely blossoms that crown the cottage walls and meadow-hedges with their beauty.

I suppose she strove to sell them, for standing there she offered them timidly to some passers-by; a few of these thrust them roughly aside; most hurried on without reply; none took them. I wondered how they could refuse that touching mute appeal.

Finding all effort useless, she turned, with a heavy, tired sigh, and went up the little street into another more narrow, and poorer still, and opening the little door of one of its desolate houses, entered and passed up its stairway, dark and steep, and smelling foully, to a very small, bare, comfortless garret. She put me down upon the floor, and struck a match a-light. By the gleam of the little lamp she trimmed, I saw for the first time the face of this flower-girl.

It was excessively lovely; very pale, very sad,

but of infinite beauty. It looked wan, as though for want of nourishment; the bow-like mouth had little colour; and the large eyes, of that gray which burns dark as night, had heavy circles under them. Her weighty yellow hair was coiled simply about her head, and her black dress was russet-hued from age and well-nigh threadbare. She was very poor, it was easy to see, and by the thinness of her transparent cheeks it seemed as though she had not tasted good food for many a day; but she was very young, sixteen years at most, and was lovely despite all the cruel antagonism of poverty and sorrow.

Who could she be? All alone, thus, in the heart of London?

I, who had seen life in the green room of the Coronet and the chambers of Vere Beltran, knew at a glance that this girl was proud by instinct and most pure in innocence.

Yes: though she had been out in the gas-lit streets at ten of the night, and only sold poor drooping thirsty flowers that no one cared to buy.

She poured some water from the broken pitcher for her faded harebells and moss-rosebuds; and laid me on a corner of her bed; and put out her lamp,

for economy's sake, no doubt, and undressed herself and knelt down to her prayers.

I do not know why it was ; but as I saw the linen fall off her delicate slender shoulders, and the yellow rippling hair fall down almost to her feet ; as I saw her kneel there with her hands folded on her bosom, and that look upon her face which Sant has given to the prophetic child of Israel, I thought, curiously enough, of Avice Dare as I had once seen *her* when she had sought her couch, with that wicked triumph in her own bared charms, and that wicked discontent within her soul, flinging herself upon her bed without a thought of prayer, with only a muttered savage word because her beauty was unseen of men, and her sleep was taken on a rude flock pallet.

This child's eyes filled with tears and her chest rose and fell with sobs as she knelt ; the moonlight, the one unstained thing that a city could not pollute, came streaming in upon her, and seeking this creature who also was incorrupt amidst corruption ; the quarters tolled often whilst she prayed there, and yet I do not think her prayers were for herself, for I heard oftentimes the murmur,—‘ Harold, Harold, Harold.’ After awhile she came and stretched her

young limbs on the hard narrow canvas bed ; her eyes closed with a long breath that still was a sob ; and—so merciful is even sorrow to all youth—that before long she slept, and, by the look upon her face, dreamed peacefully.

She awoke early, at sunrise ; and caressed me with a gentle little hand that was very white and very thin. When she was dressing she looked sadly at her flowers. Despite all her care of them, they were dead. Bluebells are the shortest lived of all flowers, once gathered : they are little gipsies, though such modest ones : they must have the freedom of their green wood and their hedgerow ; bring them beneath roofs, they perish.

Cage robins and gather bluebells, they both surely die ; they are the innocent bohemians of the forest and the lane.

‘I have nothing to give you unless you will eat dry bread?’ she said to me, breaking off for me a piece of a stale loaf that seemed the sole contents of the little cupboard in her attic. Now, I had dined late, and was not yet hungry, and I abhorred dry bread ; but lest she should deem me ungrateful or dainty, I scratched my throat with a few of the rough morsels. If you have not seen a dog force

himself to eat something he dislikes because he fears to vex the feelings of the giver by refusal, you are a very poor observer.*

Whilst I was eating it, the door was thrown violently open, and on its threshold stood a stout, red-visaged, untidy woman of fifty or thereabouts.

‘Where’s my rent?’ she demanded fiercely.

The girl’s pale cheeks grew paler still, but she looked calmly and fully in the infuriated face that was turned upon her, though her voice trembled a little as she answered.

‘I am so sorry. No one would buy anything of me yesterday. And, as I told you, I have not a penny left. But if you will kindly have patience—’

‘Patience!’ echoed the virago. ‘I’ve had a deal too much patience with such muck as you. A comin’ into honest folks houses without a shillin’ to bless yerself,—a sellin’ nasty weeds in make believe to look a trade,—a takin’ bed and board like a thief a knowin’ ye can’t pay for it! Patience! I’ll hev patience! Giv’ me what yer owe, or I’ll send for the police this minnit!’

The child grew ashen pale now, and her limbs

* I have seen it.—Ed.

shook; but her eyes did not lose their resolute frank clearness, and she answered firmly still.

‘Indeed—indeed—I paid you every farthing till this week. You know I did. And if I could only find my brother—’

‘Yer brother! Gammon o’ yer brother!’ yelled the woman, coming further into the chamber. ‘Stow that trash. I’ve had enow of it. Go and tell that rubbish where yer please, yer poor pitiful white-faced mawther, but don’t think to come over *me* no more with it. It’s a pack of lies—’

‘It is true!’—the colour flashed back into the girl’s face, and her eyes gathered a sudden deep fiery glow.

‘Lies or no lies, it ain’t nothin’ to me. I ain’t to be done no more by it. Out ye shall pack, with the constables to look after yer, if ye can’t give me my money. Give me my money! Give me my money!—’

‘I cannot give you what I have not.’

She spoke with a strange dignity in one so young, and the passion of the vixen had not power to break her self-command.

‘Then yer’ll hev to make it,’ yelled the woman. ‘Will yer go on the streets and make it? Yer well,

favoured enow, if ye waren't so shabby dressed and so white i' the gills !'

'I will go in the streets if you will let me,' answered the child, not comprehending the base question. 'But I have no money to buy fresh flowers; and, only look—who will buy these? They are quite dead !'

'And I wish you was dead along of 'em!' shrieked the fury, made more violent by the innocence of the answer. 'I'd have the shower o' hair off yer head anyhow then, and make a penny by that. Th' idee o' comin and using o' honest victuals, and honest folk's beds, and cheers, and tables, without so much as a bit o' linin to leave behind yer as yer payment. Ye'd a box when ye come, and it's dratted empty now, for I looked in't last night, and there wasn't nothin' but a nasty mouse a' gnawin at the lid.'

'I have sold what I had, to pay you for the last three weeks,' the girl replied to her, quietly still, and with a certain pathetic pride.

'Oh, yer have?' retorted her tormentor, 'and ye hain't got a mossel o' nothin' then, let alone the rags on yer back? Well, then, to jail ye'll go, my lass, and that as sure as you're a impident, lyin',

white-livered hussy as ever crep, into a honest house to—'

'This will bring you your due?' the girl said coldly, and from where it was hidden in the bosom of her dress, she drew out a little old-fashioned round gold locket, and tendered it silently to her torturer. It was given in silence, given with a singular firmness and reticence of all emotion; yet there was that in her face which made me fancy that to part with the little locket was worse to her than to part with her life.

The woman clutched it thirstily, with the ruthless greed of her cormorant class.

'A bit o' pinchbeck!' she muttered, biting it, smelling it, testing it as best she knew how: it was genuine gold, however, and she was compelled to admit thus much to herself.

'It ain't worth half you've had this week,' she said sullenly. 'But it 'ull dew. I'll no send yer to jail if ye'll trape off this minnit; and here—here's tuppence to get yerself a loaf with; nobody shan't say as I deals hard with yer, though ye've took me in shameful, and I a poor lone woman—'

The girl took up her little straw hat with one hand, and myself with the other.

‘The locket is worth twenty shillings, and what I owe you is but six. God forgive you if you were ever so wicked to my brother as you have been to me.’

Then without even glancing at the copper coins which the subdued virago, in a sort of stupid shame and gloomy wrath, held out to her, she went away down the narrow dusky staircase, and through the low door, into the street.

It was a beautiful summer morning ; the sun was radiant even in that dreary place, making indeed its squalor, and its unloveliness, and its grimy outline, more hideous and more desolate.

Sunrise is beautiful in the country ; but in the by-ways of a filthy city it is only sad—ay, and even fearful. Night pityingly covers, with its cool gray shade, that scrofula of brick, and mud, and dirt, and vileness, with which men have defaced the sweet fair face of nature : but the sunrise only shows in their uttermost nakedness those throbbing festers of the earth which your mad humanity exalts as triumphs of the tribe of Enoch.

The child went slowly out, and down the narrow road ; it was too early yet for any of the closely-pent population to be stirring. A footworn cat

moved here and there, the sparrows twittered in the gutters, a tired homeless starving dog slunk, shivering, through the warmth of dawn. She, moving like a creature in a dream, walked mechanically where chance took her.

A woman-child alone in a great city :—there is nothing more pitiful on earth.

She went on and on, slowly, and dreamily gazing straight before her. Her hands were very cold; and her lips were as white as marble.

Suddenly she paused, with a quick gasping breath ;—her frame shook with a feverish shudder ;—her eyes closed, and she reeled against the stone wall by which she stood. The next moment she sank senseless on the flags.

She fell in a half-sitting posture, against the old steps of a deserted house ; so that, to any passer-by, it would have looked as though she only rested there and slept.

I, sorely frightened and sorrowful for this young desolate creature, could only cower helpless near her : I knew not my way home, and if I had done so, should not have had the heart to leave her.

She appalled me in her awful stillness. I had

never seen death, but it seemed to me that surely I saw it now.

I moaned aloud, thinking to summon aid. I did no good.

From a house farther down a woman threw open her lattice, and shouted to me to be quiet, or she would brain me with a bit of wood. A young slender man, with his hands folded upon a book that bore a red cross on its cover, passed by on the other side : he paid no heed to my sad cries ; doubtless he was on his way to early matins, and was too absorbed in thinking of his own salvation to have an ear for me.

Presently there came into the street a cheery, ruddy, stout-built woman with shining brass pails on either side of her, whose metal clang resounded through the silence, and brought the cats out from the area rails, eyeing her expectantly. There was no one up to receive her in any one of the quiet little houses of the street ; and she filled, from her milk pails, each one of the jugs, or pots, or tin cans, which were set out on the doorstep, against her coming, in that curious trustfulness of each other, which the poor so often show in such marked contrast with their acrid suspicions of the rich.

These pots and cans were, for the chief part, covered, but in one or two the cats, dipping their noses, had a feast; and one unlucky puss, being unable to withdraw her head, set forth full gallop in her prison, raising a loud clatter with the pitcher on the pavement, and banging it to and fro till she released herself.

Even at that moment I could not but think how like she was to a human being caught by the neck in the jug of his poverty, after drinking up all the cream of pleasure; but from about the cat's head the earthen jug did at length break, falling away in a thousand pieces: who amongst you ever releases himself from the iron pot of debt?

As the woman drew nearer to us, I gathered hope that she would stop and take some pity, for her face was a broad, and homely, and pleasant one; and she had the tan of the Berkshire sun still on her skin, and the accent of the Berkshire people still in her voice. But I was disappointed.

She glanced at the recumbent figure, indeed, but she only turned aside so as not to step on it.

'More muck o' bad gells!' muttered this comely-looking, sun-bronzed Pharisee, with her pails—thus passing on with judgment.

Her cry soon echoed down a distant street.

I waited with a trembling heart, powerless and very sad.

After a little while I heard a suddenly swift pattering of feet, the rush of a large breathless body, the panting of an eager creature, and round a corner in full speed came the form of a big brown dog.

Emaciated, dust-covered, footsore, I recognized him in a moment :—it was Bronze.

He threw himself on the girl's form ; he kissed her frantically, he moaned over her, he lashed her with his tail in a paroxysm of idolatry and joy : he never saw me, but I did not need one glance from him to tell me who his darling was.

Wakened from her trance by his rough rapturous embraces, the child Gladys slowly raised herself, gazing at him with dim eyes that were unconscious of him, and of herself, and all around her : then she put out her hands feebly, and felt and grasped him by his loose brown curls : then started and looked at him with a strange fixity of gaze. At last, with a cry that pierced my heart, she flung her arms around him, and buried her face upon his neck, and wept in a very passion of tears, 'Oh Bronze, dear Bronze, good, precious Bronze !' she

murmured wildly. 'You are come, you are come!
—then he is near!'

Bronze crouched in silence at her feet.

'He is here? He is well? Oh, tell me, Bronze,' she gasped. 'Dear, dear Bronze, *do* tell me!'

Bronze could only gaze at her with tender hazel eyes, that seemed to look love into her very soul.

'Take me to him, Bronze!' she cried. 'This moment—this moment! Look! I am quite strong!'—and she darted to her feet, and stood erect, quivering all over with hope and dread and longing.

Bronze crouched again at her feet, as though to entreat pardon for a disobedience he could not help; and moaned—a piteous heart-broken and heart-breaking moan.

She sank down once more, being far weaker than she knew, and on her face there came a ghastly terror.

She seized him, and held him, and gazed into his eyes.

'Bronze—Bronze!' she gasped. 'Oh God!—is he dead? You are alone!'

Bronze lifted his head, and sent forth on the still morning air a long wail of anguish, terrible as the Irish coronach over an open grave:—then down

he crouched afresh before her, and silently caressed her feet, her hands, her dress, her hair.

She knew the meaning of that one long note of woe; and without a cry, without a sign, she fell back senseless on the stones.

There came down the street at that instant a girl who sang as she went a snatch of a music-hall ballad.

The voice was fresh and gay and very full of melody, the mirthful slang words rang out in strange contrast with the gloom and the silence around her. She was a pretty creature with flushed cheeks and round limbs, fantastically though cheaply attired, whilst her chestnut curls were tumbled in picturesque disorder out of a tiny Watteau hat with a bunch of moss-rosebuds in its front. At a glance I recognized in her the little Wood-Elf of the Coronet's Burlesque. Would a little dancer of hornpipes and singer of slang songs be more merciful than the pious youth on his way to his canticles, and the buxom milk-woman with her swift judgment?

Little Courcy was coming no doubt from some casino-ball or theatrical supper, that had been prolonged till sunrise, and the devil himself would be strong in her, and utter through her mouth some coarse and cruel jest.

As she approached her eyes fell on the child Gladys and on Bronze, who was vainly trying all he knew to recall his recovered treasure to life and consciousness. She looked, paused, then crossed the street.

‘Mercy on me ! what is the matter ?’ she cried. As none of us gave answer, she stooped and raised the girl’s insensible form against the steps, and loosened her dress, and fanned her with her little hat. These efforts failing, she darted swiftly, with more regard for charity than honesty, towards one of the little milk jugs standing before the door of the nearest house. It was a slender white china pitcher, and she forced its mouth between Gladys’ lips, and poured some of the still warm liquid down her throat.

After a few moments it revived her ; her eyes opened with a dull dreamy stare in them. Through want, and exhaustion, she was still unconscious of where she was or of what had happened.

‘Are you better, dear?’ asked the Wood-Elf very kindly, ‘can’t you hear me? won’t you speak?’

‘I do not know,’ she muttered. ‘He is dead,—he is dead.’

‘ Who is dead ? ’

Gladys put her hands to her temples, and gazed about her with the look of a hunted deer.

‘ He is,—look !—Bronze would never have left him, and Bronze is all alone. He must be dead, you know, he must ! ’ In the simple words there was an unutterable heartbroken certainty of an irreparable woe. Nellie, quick of thought, answered to the truth as she guessed it.

‘ Are you only sure “ he ” is dead because the dog is alone ? That is no proof. Dogs stray, or are stolen, very often. Do not think “ he ” is dead only from that.’

The girl glanced up at her with eyes in which a swift radiance of sudden hope shot through the dullness of stupified senses. Then her lips quivered, and she burst into a passion of tears; the spirit which tyrannous and vulgar brutality could not bend broke now at the first touch of kindness.

Nellie let that tempest of grief somewhat exhaust itself, then she spoke again.

‘ My home is close by here. Come along with me if you can walk; you are not fit to be out in the streets. Or shall I go home with you; is it far ? ’

‘I have no home.’

‘None! then come along with me and rest a bit. We will see for “him” afterwards, whoever he is. Come along. I live close by.’

Gladys strove to rise.

‘You are very good,’ she said gently, as she lifted her hands to her forehead again, and looked about her with that pitiful, wondering, uncomprehending look. Her limbs trembled; she had very little strength, and scarcely any knowledge of where she was or of what she said.

‘Come, then,’ said Nellie simply, and she took her hand in hers, and half led, half supported her through that street and the next, Bronze and I following them close at hand. He had made no objection or opposition to the Wood-Elf’s possession of his treasure, nor had he as yet taken any notice or given any recognition of myself.

Where Nellie went was to a vegetable shop in a little street to the left of the one in which she had found us. It was a small place, dingy, dusky, smutty from the sacks of coal that were also sold on the small premises; but with a certain fresh and pleasant smell from cabbages, and lettuces, and lemons, and thymes, that brought vaguely to

my senses the memory of the little herb-garden in the Peak.

Early as it was the shutters were down, and a white-haired, brown-faced old woman was washing some sage and marjoram in a wooden bowl of water.

‘Lawk a mussey, Nell, why when’ll be a bed next?’ she cried, catching sight of her late returning wanderer. ‘Ten to six, as I live; I doan’t like it, I doan’t like it.’

‘Don’t you, grandmother?’ said Nell, indifferently. ‘Well, I do, and that’s all about it. Do the kettle boil yet?’

‘Kittle was on the bile beautiful half-a-hour ago, but she’s off agen now. Kittles can’t be looked for to bile for ever,’ responded the old woman with a little asperity. ‘In my young days if wenches had come in at six o’clock, after trapezin and flamickin about all night, they’d ha’ had to go down on their bended knees ’stead o’ axin, like a queen, if kittles biled. But, Lord’s sake! who’ve ye brought in with ye?’

‘A girl I know, that wants a bit of breakfast. I met her hard by, a pretty girl, gran’, and a deal more respectable than I am. Now, look sharp, there’s an old dear, and get me some tea, and put

a dash of the craythur in it, for I'm dead tired, and so is she.'

And Nellie therewith half drew, half forced, up the stairs and into a little room at the head of them, the still half senseless, half stupefied form of Gladys. Bronze and I followed of course.

'Dogs !' screamed the old woman below, 'two dogs, Nell—Nell—them nasty, dusty, ugly beasts shan't go up on my clean boards.'

But we were up, on the newly-scrubbed stairs, and Nell called out with careless answer to the clamour that the dogs might do as they liked, her grandmother wasn't to bother.

The little chamber, like all about the place, was scrupulously clean : it was a small square white-washed room with deal furniture and a truckle bed, and a latticed window, that looked out dolefully on chimneys and on roofs. But there were touches of grace about it, despite its nakedness, as there were about Nell herself, despite her impudence ; about the little window the golden-drop creeper grew out from a pot, and 'made a sunshine in that shady place.' There was a canary in a bright brass cage canopied with white blossomed chickweed and the amber tufts of groundsel. There was a heap of bright-hued

things in a corner, which, though only the trumpery satins and tinfoil glitter of stage costumes, still made a glow of colour and a shine of silver. And on the bed was a short full skirt of rose-hued tartan, that was fresh and dainty and unworn, and gave something of the grisette's grace to the barren attic. This new ball robe Nellie cast aside, as roughly as though it were an old piece of sacking, and with a gentle force pushed her guest down upon the pallet, and bade her lie there and not speak.

Gladys obeyed, her senses still but half awake and incapable of resistance, and Bronze, flinging his huge form on the bed at her feet, kept watch and ward over her safety.

In and out of the room the Wood-Elf darted, some half-dozen times, noiselessly always, and brought by degrees tea and toast, and bread, and a cluster of round radishes white and smooth as ivory, and a green fresh crown of dewy cress. All the while the voice of the old woman below was grumbling, in a running chorus of blame and of complaint; but Nellie paid no heed. Indeed, as I learned later, she was justified in this, since her money paid the house and all that was therein.

Vainly did she entreat the girl Gladys to touch

food: she could not eat. Food was loathsome to one who had been without it for four-and-twenty hours, and who for a month past had well-nigh starved. Not so her good Samaritan, who, having eaten four hours earlier a hearty supper of lobster, oysters, ices, and confectionery, attacked with a will the radishes and bread and butter. The infusion of brandy in the tea, which she had put unknown to her young wayfarer, acted like a soporific on the child, who probably had never tasted the spirit in her life. It flushed her face, it warmed her chill and trembling limbs, it made her eyelids heavy, and drop with sleep, against her will or even her knowledge.

Deep dreamless slumber, like the slumber of an infant, came over her, and she lay on the narrow bed with all that beautiful unconscious colourless repose you see in a dead child who has died painlessly.

Bronze, crouching nearer, and, also, refusing all offers of food, since they involved the leaving of his post, stretched himself on guard.

Nellie, munching her radishes as rabbits munch clover, sat and looked at her with curiosity.

‘By the looks on her she’d do for the profession,’ the Wood-Elf muttered to herself. ‘But I guess she’d go and break her heart in it, as that D’Eyn-

court woman did. You honest loyal thing,' she went on, laying a quantity of broken bread beside Bronze, 'your bones are half through your skin, and you're fairly perished, and yet you'll go without eating rather than leave *her*. Hang me, if you dumb 'uns don't beat us hollow !'

Then, without noticing me, she threw off all her finery, dipped her face into a pan of cold water to take the rouge off, wrapped herself up in an old blanket, and, curling herself up in a corner of the room, was soon fast asleep like a dormouse.

In something less than three hours, by the tolling of the clocks, she awoke. All women are not at all pretty when they awake, some look very stupid, some very cross, some very pallid and untidy; but Nellie looked pretty, with her cheeks as red as roses and her eyes as blue as forget-me-nots, and her chestnut waves of hair all tumbled, and her ruddy mouth half pouting and half yawning.

She splashed about in her cold water like an otter or a salmon; came out of it ruddy and fresh, and dripping like a rose in a shower; then she dressed herself very softly, wrote on a big card with great, sprawling, ill-formed letters, '*You are with a friend. Do not fear !*' put the card where

the sleeper's eyes would fall on it if they unclosed, and then left the room, locking the door from without.

'What d'ye know o' that wench up-stairs? Next to nothing, I'll be bound,' I heard the old woman's grumbling voice ask as she went down.

'Less than nothing, Gran,' the Wood-Elf answered gaily. 'But I'll wager she's a good girl, and that's more than I am!'

'Y're good enow,' grumbled the old dame, 'if yer wouldn't stop out so long a nights; and if ye wouldn't spend such a power o' money on yer victuals and yer finery; and if ye wouldn't be allays a givin' credit to all them trapezin poor as asks yer, and a wastin' apples and nuts and pen-narths o' baccy on all the young uns and the old uns o' the street.'

The Wood-Elf only laughed, and (by the more distant echo of the laugh) disappeared, I think, into the street.

As for me, I was in high dudgeon to be unrecognized and pent in durance like this; and Bronze would not enter into any sort of converse, nor permit me to utter a sound or move a limb, lest I should disturb the sleep of Gladys.

I felt deep interest in her ; I could not help it ; but I also wanted greatly to return to Beltran, and I thought with a sort of anguish of the delicious minced chicken on which his servant was wont at this hour of the day to regale me. One's regrets for a lost friend are never so poignant as when that loss also entails a limitation of one's daily dainties.

So I withdrew myself in a corner and sulked, having an erroneous notion, caught up from human-kind, that sulkiness was a fine vindication of dignity.

With noon the Wood-Elf returned, having been down, I dare say, to the theatre in that toilsome routine which forms the most laborious part of the profession. To skip and sing and spout at night in the blaze of the light, with the stimulus of the crowded house, and the flattery of the clapping hands,—that is well enough, even when one is not a star but only a little fifth-rate performer with a guinea a week. But to tramp down to the house at noon, in snow, or rain, or heat, or tempest, and go through all the dreary repetitions in the ugly darkened daylight ; to be scolded by shrill voices, and to be pushed about by rough hands, and to stand till your legs ache while scenes are shifted and

elaborate sets are arranged;—ah! think twice, my good maiden, unless indeed you be a Rachel or a Mars, before you refuse the comely village-carpenter's marriage troth, or leave the old father's mill-house in the woods, or fling away the homely peace of life on the moor farm, for *this*.

Gladys once during her absence had awakened and started and gazed about her, then beholding Bronze and reading the kindly words on the great card, had sighed and smiled as in a dream, and fallen once more into slumber.

The opening of the door aroused her now, and aroused her fully.

She sprang up on her bed, and turned her beautiful wild eyes on Nellie.

'Who are you that are so good to me? And where am I? And how is he? And why is Bronze alive, yet, all alone? Oh, tell me! Pray do tell me!'

Nellie sat down beside her and regarded her with perplexity. She scarcely knew what was best to say; and she was absorbed in gazing with all her might at this creature, still younger and far more desolate than she, whom yet she felt was as widely different from her as though she had come

from one of those distant worlds of stars which she, who dwelt in the gas-glare of cities, scarce ever even saw.

Gladys caught both her hands.

‘Oh, do tell me! You are so good, and you wrote yourself there my friend. What is it that has happened? and why is Bronze here? and where is Harold?’

Nellie was forced to answer something.

‘My dear, I don’t know,’ she said, slowly. ‘I found you in the street. You had fainted. I brought you home with me. That’s all. Whose dog is Bronze?—and who are you?’

The splendid flash of hope paled out of the girl’s face. It grew white with vague fear.

‘I am Gladys Gerant,’ she answered, breathlessly; ‘and Bronze belonged to my brother, who took him away with him a year ago. And I came to London some weeks since, and I went to the house where Harold had written his last letters, and he was not there. They only know that he had left them—long ago; and I never have learned more. And Bronze rushed on me to-day, and then I found he was alone. I was sure that Harold must be dead, or the dog would never have left him.’

She spoke in an agony of dread, her slender hands locked hard in one another.

It was an inarticulate slight fragment for Nellie to gather any sense from it. But she had tact, and said the first thing that seemed best to her.

‘Dead?—because Bronze is alone? What nonsense, child. Who put such fancies in your head. The best of dogs gets lost over and over again. Why, if he was half as fond of your brother as you says, he’d never have left his grave,—that you may take your word on.’

‘That is true,’ murmured Gladys. ‘You would never have left his grave, would you, Bronze? dear, good, patient, precious Bronze?’

‘That I would not, could I have found it,’ said Bronze’s wistful eyes as he listened.

‘That he would not,’ averred Nellie. ‘This Harold of yours is alive—depend on it; the dog got astray somewheres, and smelt you out, as those clever beasts always does. What was Harold?’

‘Harold? A poet!’

There was a superb glory and pride on her young wan face as she spoke those words. Nellie, like the practical, shrewd little worldling that she was, gave a significant shrug.

‘A poet! Wants a deal o’ money to be of that trade! Was he rich?’

‘Oh no. We have been very poor.’

‘And he come to town to seek his fortune? And to make a great man of his-self?’

‘He came to London for that—yes.’

‘And what did you come for?’

‘Only to find him.’

‘Whew! Without an address!’

‘I had that one. But he had not written for so long that I felt certain something had happened. Oh, something has!—something must!’

She hid her face upon her hands, and shuddered. The dim shadow of an unknown woe is worse still than the presence of a calamity whose worst is told.

‘Nonsense!’ cried Nellie imperatively. ‘You must not fret yourself like that. Young men have a hundred different lodging-houses in a twelvemonth. For you to come to look for him in that sort of way is just madness like—you might as well set to look for needles in a bottle o’ hay. He might be within a stone’s throw of ye, and you never know it. Never think a man dead for that little. We’ll try and find him. Poets isn’t so common as women;

and I'll ask some gentlemen I know as writes in papers. But come, tell me a bit more about yourself, dear. Are you all alone in this place ?'

'I am all alone in the world.'

'Goodness ! Well—a many is. Only you look as if you'd never roughed it like. How did it come about, if one may ask ?'

Gladys, by one of those strong efforts by which she had restrained all emotion when she had given the locket to her tyrant, looked up with dry, calm eyes, and spoke with a low and steady voice.

'Of course you may ask everything. You have been so good—'

'I aren't good !' said the Wood-Elf pettishly, while the colour sprang ruddily in her cheeks.

'You are to me. That is all I know. It happened in this way : we had a farm in Sussex, such a fresh, lovely, quiet place. My father was never rich ; but he was better than rich ; so wise, so gentle, so God-fearing, so loving to his men, and to his beasts. I always think that Isaac must have been just such a man as he. And we were very happy—very—though troubles came. You know farming is but uncertain work ; the sun, and the wind, and the rain, and the snow, are all its minis-

ters ; but they rule very ill for it sometimes. When I was quite a little child I think we had no want ; but I can hardly remember the time that there was not some anxiety in the house. My father was very generous, and always gave much to the poor ; he could not sit down and break bread for himself knowing that another wanted it within his reach. And the sheep would sicken, and the lambs die, and the wheat rot, and the hops wither—so often, so often ! Not from any fault of my father's, but just from the cruelty of things, as it seemed. And yet the life was so happy !—at least I thought it so. Harold, I know, grew tired, and chafed because of the stillness, and would leave us, and go forth to make the world ring with his name, as he said. My father took blame to himself because, he said, that it had been his reading aloud of Shakespeare, and Milton, and Massinger, and Ford, and Jonson, and all of them that had first moved poor Harold with this spirit of longing and of unrest : I do not think it was that Harold was born to dream dreams. But I must not trouble you with this — you only want to know why I am here. Well, Harold left us ; and my mother seemed to droop ever after. In

a little time she died ; of the cold, they said, since she was delicate in health ; but I am sure what killed her was the absence of Harold. He was full of grief when he heard of it ; but he did not offer to return. Nor did my father press it. "If the lad can do for himself it will be well," he used to say. "To come back hither is to be buried under the timbers of a falling house." He meant by that, things were very ill with us, and that he had no heritage to bequeath to my brother. The land had been mortgaged many a year, had been mortgaged when he came to it by my grandparents. But he had always paid interest to the day ; and those who held the mortgages had promised solemnly never to call for more. The year that Harold left us was one of misfortune from seed-time to harvest. The cattle died, the hay failed because of the drought, the hops did not yield, and two of the best horses were struck by lightning ; nothing fared well of it all. It was a terrible summer ; terrible, and yet so beautiful ! Thus, at last, my father for once could not pay all the sums that were due, and the mortgagees broke faith with him, and claimed the old house and all the lands. My father was a proud man, and just, and upright ; and—it killed him. He died of

paralysis, they say ; but it was only his heart that was broken ! When he was dead, they took all. They said that there was nothing for Harold or me ; it might be so, I cannot tell. I only know they thrust me over the threshold the first day that he was laid in his grave.'

A convulsive shudder shook her, and the veins of her throat swelled like cords ; but she kept calmness still, and ended her tale in a few brief phrases.

'A woman who lived in a village near, took me to her home through the winter. A good, old, tender creature, blind, to whom I read, and for whom I wrote. She said my father had been good to her in her youth. But when the spring came I could not live on her charity. It was not possible. I served her in the rough, cold season ; but with the bright weather a young niece of hers always arrived, and then I knew she could really need me no more. Besides, I longed to see Harold. So I came hither. I had a little money ; five pounds in silver that my godmother once had saved for me, all in bright sixpences, and I thought it would last well enough till I had found my brother. But you see—it went so little way. It was almost all gone, it seemed, in a week or two. Then I bought some flowers and

tried to sell them ; but I did not get again so much as I paid for them ; and—and—the people were so rude, so jeering, so cruel. And at last I had no money, and the woman of the house turned me out, and—there is no more to tell. Only that now I have found Bronze all alone, I am sure that my brother is not with the living.'

She ceased, and was very still ; still with that quiet of absolute grief which is far more intense in its desolation than all more passionate and eloquent emotions.

Nellie had listened with great tears gathering in her bright eyes that had the sunny azure of the little cuckoo's-eye flowers.

She was touched, she was awed, she was subdued, she was for once at a loss for all words.

'Don't wed yourself to that fancy, dear,' she said softly at last. 'Maybe after a bit the dog will help you find him. As I telled you, them poor beasts never leave their masters' graves ; and it's more like by far that Bronze have been stray. Whose dog's that other little white 'un that was with you ?'

'One that I found last night. And now,—may I not know who you are that have been so good to me ?'

The Wood-Elf flushed a little hotly under the short locks of auburn that fell over her forehead in a thick waving fringe.

‘My name’s Nell Browne. Leastways, I was baptized so in the Poorhouse. My mother came tramp, they say; she died the day I was born, locked up, I think, in a sort of a damp hutch. Nobody knew she was in trouble till they looked in in the morning and found me—and her dead. There’s a many dies that kind of way. They never knew no more about me, nor who my father was. I dare say he wasn’t no good. So it don’t matter. Gran’ here is no grandmother of mine. They farmed me out to her when I was seven, as a kind of little maid like. The old woman kept a little tea-shop in a village down in Berks; and she was very good to me; never beat me; not once. Well, you see, when I grew up a bit I was pretty and lissom; and I thought as I might do better nor go on sweeping out a little sty of a tea-shop all my days. So I bid good-bye to Gran’, and the noddin’ Chiney figures, and I come up here to seek my fortune—’

‘And they were not cruel to you?’

‘Bless you, my dear!’ answered Nell hastily, with the colour still hot on her face, and her eyes wan-

dering a little away to the speck of gold that the Canary made against the light. 'You're the sort Life's cruel to:—not me. I got all my banging about in the workhouse. I've done pretty well since. You see I've a knack of singing and jigging about, and I've the go of it in me, and so I took to it natural, as it were, and I've fared very well as things run. I've been five years at it, though you wouldn't hardly think so; I'm twenty come July, and I was fifteen when I left Granny and the Chiney nodding-men.'

Gladys looked bewildered. 'I don't understand,' she said softly. 'What is it that you do?'

'Stage, my dear,' said Nellie a little curtly,—
'the theatre, you know.'

Gladys' eyes opened in mute awe, and radiated with a solemn wonder.

'The stage!—what, do you play Beatrice?' she murmured breathlessly, 'and Victoria Corrombona, and the Duchess of Malfi, and Imogene, and—'

'Dear heart, no,' cried Nellie, laughter back on her lips, though her tears were not dry on her cheeks. 'Me take leading business? Not a bit of it. I just dress as a boy, or a sprite, or a devil, or something queer, and jump about, and sing, and talk

balderdash, and look pretty ; that's all I have to do. It was awfully hard at first, you know. One could only begin, of course, with penny gaffs, and—'

'Penny gaffs !'

'I beg your pardon ; I mean low places of amusement, where the poor people come.'

'Poor people need not be low.'

'Oh, of course not, but they mostly are. And that's how one has to begin. But that's over now. I'm at a fashionable house, and—and—it's all right enough. A year ago, when I'd made some money, I thought I'd go and have a look at the tea-shop. So I went down by return one Saturday to the little old village, and I asked after granny. The Chiney men was there, nodding fit to kill themselves, and looking as wise as judges ; the street was there, and the trees were there ; and an old cat, as was our kitten when I first went to sweep out the shop, was there too, a sunning of herself on the doorstep. But poor old gran wasn't there. She'd come to grief ; got in debt, you know,—and all the plant and the things had been sold right over her head, and she was living on the parish in the wretchedest old almshouse, hard by the church. So I just said to her, "Come along, gran, and keep house along of

me ;” and I took this bit of a place, and set her up in business like, because she’s happier thinking as how she does something for her own living. And she’s a good deal of use, the old woman is ; she gives cads right down facers when they come after me ; and it makes it feel a bit like a home, you know, having her, though she’s cranky as cranky can be. It’s a sort of fancy one has—that of getting a home, when one hasn’t had none but a workhouse.’

In the expressive eyes of Gladys Gerant I saw a hundred changes pass whilst Nellie spoke. There was shrinking distaste ; there was wondering non-comprehension ; there was an instinctive sense of wrong, and yet there were the swift sympathies of a noble nature with that gratitude which had thus paid its debt to an old and helpless creature, and with that wistful desire for a life denied, a love unknown, that thus broke out in Nellie’s latest words.

She did not answer for a moment : these two young lives, so widely sundered by training and temper, bewildered one another. They had only the common ground of their mutual trust.

‘ Are you happier than I, never to have loved any—never to have grieved for any ? ’ said Gladys soft-

ly. 'No, I think not ; I wish—I wish you had such memories as mine.'

'Oh God! So do I wish!' cried Nellie with a curious passionate cry ; she rose impetuously and crossed to where her canary hung ; she felt, I believe, as though she would have died in the streets on the morrow only to have such memories of the beloved dead, as this child possessed and cherished.

'But you see,' Gladys murmured, with a strange sad tender smile upon her face, 'I have had all my summer in my spring ; it is all over now. There are nothing but the night and the winter. While you—you have had the cold and the darkness first ; your sun has yet to dawn.'

Nellie turned quickly and stared at her. She had never heard any one speak like this. 'Are *you* a poet too?' she said suddenly.

'I? oh no! Harold could tell what he felt, I can only feel ; but I am rested now, I must go. I cannot thank you, only—'

'Go! what do you mean to do?'

'I do not know. I am not afraid. God will give me some friend as he gave me you.'

'Nonsense! ravens gobble up worms on their own hook, and sew up the rents in their own

nests: they don't go about on heavenly messages now-a-days.'

'But *you* must have found friends when you came hither, quite alone?'

Nellie's cheeks flushed. 'That's neither here nor there! Friends! a woman has no friends unless she has two thousand a-year. She has only—but that's no odds to talk about. Just you stay there, stay as long as you like—stay till you are strong; and then we'll set about seeing for Harold.'

'I could not live on your charity.'

There was that singular dignity in the answer with which this delicate, terrified, desolate child had awed her vulgar tyrant; a pride lofty, stainless, incapable of accepting alms.

'Charity!' cried Nellie, quickly catching the tone and translating it aright, 'it wouldn't be no charity of mine. You're so different to me: so gentle-born like, and uses such fair language; and I dessay so clever, and book learned, and all that. There's a deal you might do for me, for I ain't no scholar, and if I could only read hard words off quicker and speak 'em with a nicer accent, as it were, why, they all say as I've a deal of talent, and there isn't the least atom of reason why I shouldn't

take a much higher line of business. And all that you might teach me ; only by being with you I'd pick it up like, and then one day, perhaps, when you've found your brother (for I'm sure as he may be found and shall be found), he'll write a great play for me, and I'll make a grand hit in it, and then we shall both say what wonderful good has come of Bronze's hollering out, and bringing of me to you on a spring morning, all by chance like, don't you see ?'

Gladys looked at her with a look of infinite comprehension and gratitude.

'I see how nobly you try to make me think your charity a selfishness, but I see no fit return that I could give you for living at your cost ; and I must beg of you to let me have my way,—and go.'

'Goto death or perdition, you innocent creature!' muttered Nell : then at that instant she caught sight of the collar on my neck, and darted at me, and read the inscription, glad of some diversion, as her eloquence failed of its point. She dropped me on the floor, with that curious disregard of our bones and feelings from which we dogs perpetually suffer, as she read :

'Why ! as I live, it's little Puck,' she cried.

‘ You know the dog ? ’

‘ To be sure I do ! Why, here’s a run of luck—there’s five pounds reward out for it this forenoon, offered on handbills in the shops, you know, and one never thought once of this little beast of yours and Puck being one and the same, I was so busy wondering about you.’

‘ You know its owner too, then ? ’

‘ Why, gracious, he’s the lord as owns our theatre. Here, I’ll take it back this minute to him, and bring you the five sovereigns, and if you pays me half-a-guinea a week, you’ll treat me like a queen, and you can stay on here two or three months anyhow.’

‘ Take the dog to him, but do not bring me back any money ; I am not a thief, to take payment for honesty.’

‘ What ! but he’s offered the five sovs. for the dog ; you’ve a right to it,—where is the harm ? ’

‘ There may be no harm, but I would not take it. My father would have never let me accept a reward for doing such a little simple thing, so plainly right as that.’

‘ No wonder your father’s farm was swallowed up in mortgages,’ muttered Nellie. ‘ Well, shall I

take Puck any how, and will you wait till I come back, certain sure ? ’

‘ I will indeed, thankfully. But I beg of you to tell that gentleman that I am very glad to be able to restore his dog, but that if he were to send me any money, I should at once return it. Do not tell him either that I want money, or he might think himself bound to give it, please remember,—I trust you.’

Nellie turned, a little uneasily, from the grave sweet gaze of those thoughtful and pleading eyes; eyes half prayer, and half command.

‘ I’ll be careful,’ she murmured, ‘ but I’ll go at once, for you aren’t strong enough, and I know as he’ll be pleased to see the little un safe back.’

And with that she carried me forth, and closed the door once more upon her guest.

‘ What a queer lot of chances ! ’ she murmured. ‘ I am at my wits’ end, little Puck, what to do for that child : she’s a lady bred if she aren’t a lady born ; she’s not fit for our life ; she makes one feel so good-for-nothing-like with that look of her two big eyes. I’ll tell *him* anyhow, if I can see him ; he’s generous and he’s a gentleman, and I know he aren’t one half so wicked as they says. Maybe he will do

something for her,—I never believe he'd go for to hurt her,—an innocent thing like a fawn or a kid.'

Then, with myself under her arm and her little rosebud crowned hat on her head, Nellie set forth into the streets again followed by a grumbling valediction from the old woman to the effect that 'gells as was allus a flauntin' and a trapezin abroad i' that fashion, and a takin' of low mawthers to gie 'em bed and board, couldn't look to kip a roof over their heads a week longer, with taters at two shillin' the quarter, and every blessed head of brocoli eyel et-holed wi' worums.' To which dismal prophecy Nellie paid no heed; but wound her way through the streets which led from her own little home in the low purlieus of Westminster, to the aristocratic places wherein the Coronet and its patrons were to be found.

When we reached Beltran's chambers it was six o'clock, and his night-brougham with its pair of bays stood before the house; with a certain shyness Nellie, who lost her hardihood with her entrance into his neighbourhood, rang the doorbell.

No sooner was the door opened than I wriggled out of her hold, dashed up the stairs, and bursting

through the apartments, danced and whirled round Beltran, where he stood before the mirror in his dressing-room. He welcomed me kindly, whilst they told him who desired to see him.

He was already dressed for dinner, and soon passed into his reception-room, where Nellie was standing, looking for once shy, and ill at her ease. Nellie was not promoted to that standing from which a burlesque dancer can hail lords and gentlemen as Fred and George and Jack, as old fellow, and old cuss, and old hoss; perhaps because she 'kept straighter than most of them;' the glories of drag-seats and of little dinners were as yet unknown to her; and a peer was to her still only a very great and terrible person. For Nell no brougham waited as yet; no stalls clapped approval with delicate lavender gloves; and no Richmond repast was ever ordered at three guineas a head. She was as yet only a little dancing-girl,—unpromoted.

'I am very much obliged to you, Nellie,' said Beltran, as he gave her a kindly good-morning. 'I am glad the dog found so pretty a guardian. Won't you sit down, and have some fruit or some tea?'

Nellie blushed, and fidgeted. The very languor

and ease of Beltran's manner—a manner as natural to him as it was to breathe—only increased her unusual perturbation. It was easy, no doubt, to chaff, and flout, and exchange impertinences and puns with young university men or boy-soldiers in at Casinos; but it was very much more difficult to her to speak out to and look straight at this thoroughbred, indolent, weary-looking employer of hers, whose consummate insolence, when he was displeased, had, she knew, passed into a by-word even amongst his own set.

‘I didn’t find Puck myself, sir,’ she murmured. ‘It was a young girl as is at mine now, my lord; and she was almost dying this morning; and I took her in, though Gran’ made a fuss, and she’s gentlebred, I’m sure, though it seems as how she be all alone, and hasn’t not a shilling in the world; but she told me not to say a word about that to you, because she seems so proud like, and she won’t accept of no reward, and she trusted me not to tell, and now I am telling; and I feel so mean, and yet I don’t know what to do. She is so helpless and seems so innocent, and with it all she is as proud; and you see, my lord, for a girl like me to work for her living aren’t nothing; but this one—’

And Nellie broke down in her flood of disconnected and involved phrases, stammering very much, and entangled in a web of words. Beltran smiled as he stood by the hearth, but only kindly, with no touch of contempt.

‘I don’t quite understand. Tell me all about it, Nellie. Don’t suppose I’m in a hurry. I dine down at Greenwich to-night, but I needn’t start for half-an-hour. Who is it that is too proud to take these five pounds for the puppy?’

Thus encouraged and reassured the Wood-Elf told her own tale, and that which she had heard also. Told it, too, rapidly indeed, and very brokenly, and with not any eloquence save that of feeling, but pathetically for all that, by reason of her quick, ardent, honest sympathies with its subject; and Beltran listened, yielding her far more attention, and indeed more respect, than I had seen him show to the elegant nothings of a marchioness, or the coquettish repartees of an ambassadress.

‘And you see, my lord,’ continued the girl eagerly, her awe of him fading away in the excitement of her genuine pity and desire to do good, ‘my sort of life’s well enough for the like of me. I’ve always roughed it, and I’m fond of the business, and I

never was eddicated nor nothing of that kind ; but this one,—she may be a farmer's daughter ; she says so ; but she's a lady, if ever I see one, and she's proud, and so delicate, and so coy-like, she couldn't do as I do, she couldn't. She'd just go mad with the rudeness, and the bustle, and the—the—shamefulness, as one may say. And I haven't a notion what on earth to do for her,—and she won't touch them sovereigns as you've offered for little Puck ; and I shall never be able to stop her from rushing off again right into starvation and her coffin, and I thought as how maybe, if it wasn't making too bold, you might take a kind of pity on her, and know some great lady or another as might know of something as would suit her ! '

And she paused at last, fairly out of breath, and frightened at her own temerity now the words were uttered. Beltran smiled again.

'Great ladies are not very easy to persuade, I fear, in such cases. But I will do anything that I can for this child you have so generously befriended. She will not take the five pounds, you are sure ? '

'No, sir ; I am sure she will not.'

'But you can take and use it for her ? '

‘No, sir, I couldn’t. I don’t tell a lie well at no time, and I never could tell one at all with her big eyes a watching of me.’

‘Well, it is difficult then to help her. Of course if she were fit for the theatre I might give her a place; do you think she would be?’

‘She has the looks for it, sir; and she fired up like a wild thing about Imogene and Juliet and that lot. But you see, my lord—I mean—as she’d have to begin—being so poor, and so young, and nobody not knowing about her—as she’d have to begin like I did, just with hard, hard work, and a shilling a night, and a miserable tramp every morning and evening to and fro; she’d die off, I think, of cold, and worry, and hardship. And—and—she’s that coy, and dainty, and proud; her heart would break on the stage, I think.’

Beltran laughed.

‘Do you think hearts break on the stage, Nellie? I don’t.’

‘I don’t know, sir. They says as Mrs D’Eyncourt’s did. I don’t suppose there’s a many as keeps on the stage as cares a hang; but some few as is drove off of it, as one may say, sir, do.’

‘Perhaps so. I never considered the question.

If your protégée would not like the stage,—what is her name, by the way ?’

‘An odd name, sir,—one as don’t sound altogether English—Gladys Gerant.’

‘Gerant ! It is English enough, very old English. Her brother must surely be the same lad that wrote those verses which I—which the world has taken to praising.’

‘She did say as her brother were a poet, sir.’

‘That is very curious,’ murmured Beltran, stirred for the moment out of his habitual indifference to all created things. ‘There is not much doubt, I should think, but that they must be the same. However, there is small consolation for her, Nellie, in this : the boy is dead.’

‘Dead !’ echoed Nellie. ‘Oh, dear heart !—how sorry I am. I have told her so to keep on believing he is alive, and that she’d find him and be happy with him, and all that ! Might I make so bold as to ask what you know of him, my lord ?’

Beltran walked to the other end of the room, and gave her a pretty green volume.

‘Nothing in life,’ he said carelessly. ‘But these poems are a little the talk of the town, and you see

by the inscription that the author is dead.'

Nellie turned the leaves over reverently and helplessly; the dirty pages of Lacy's 'acting-editions' were the only ones she ever strove to read.

'To be clever enough to make a book as big as this, and then die,' she murmured. 'Lord! how sad it seem! I never can tell her; oh! I never can tell her! Couldn't I hear something of him, sir, where this was printed?'

'I think you had better not try. You see you know nothing of her.'

'Oh, sir!' cried the Wood-Elf eagerly, in her zeal forgetting her awe of him. 'You'd never say them sort of suspecting things of her if you could only look in her face! If ever I see a face as was all innocence, and loveliness, and pride, and light, and sadness like, all mixed up together and changing every minute, I see it now in hers—I do indeed. There's that about her, sir, as do seem to make me feel so common, and so coarse, and so good-for-nought beside her. My bit of a place aren't fit for her, and my talk will only do her harm, and—and—oh! I know*as every word she says is gospel-true. I'd swear it!'

'I like to hear you, Nellie,' said Beltran kindly.

‘It is good and generous of you. I am not doubting in the least. But at the same time you could not satisfy the publishers that she was any connection of this writer’s; and if you did there would be very little good in it. Poems never pay: these are no exception to the rule. The town may talk of them; but five hundred people, at the outside, buy them. Leave the matter with me. And until you hear from me again, tell this child that you have lighted on her brother’s work at a bookseller’s—take her that copy, it may give her pleasure—and persuade her to stay with you till you can hear of him. It is not worth while to tell her he is dead.’

As he spoke he twisted out the front leaf or two which bore the record of the young poet’s brief life and death, and handed the volume back to her.

‘But what shall I tell her, sir, please?’ murmured Nellie. ‘She’s not a one as I could tell false to; and she’ll ask me, and ask me, and say she won’t live on charity.’

‘Tell her the truth, then, not all of it, but just so much as this:—That you told me her name, and that I gave you this book, and that I will see her myself to-morrow. She will not leave you then,

unless she be an utter little fool.'

'She's no fool, sir ; but she's dreadful proud.'

'She's all the better for that. Leave me your address. I'll try and get to you at noon.'

'Tisn't a fit place for the like of you, sir ; 'tisn't, indeed,' stammered Nellie. 'It's nothing but a little old green-stuff shop, and in a horrid part of the town, too.'

Beltran laughed.

'My dear girl, I have been in fifty times worse places, I will warrant. I'll see you at noon.'

Nellie took the hint that her interview was ended, and rose.

'You're very, very good, my lord,' she said, earnestly. 'I don't know how to thank you. She'd do it better nor me. I was sure as you was kind and pitiful, though—'

'Though what? Come, out with it !'

Nellie looked for once up in his face, and took courage from its look.

'Why, in the theatre, you know, my lord, they're very afeard of you ; and they calls you very hard, and very indifferent, and very full of scorn like. But I never thought that they spoke as was all true about that.'

‘Didn’t you? Well, I suspect they did. Good-bye. And, for your own share in bringing back that little rascal, do me the pleasure to wear this.’

He tossed lightly into her lap as he spoke a pretty necklet of quaint Roman beads, which lay with other trifles of the sort in an old Vernis Martin dish on a table near him.

Nellie coloured as brilliantly with pleasure as she had done with embarrassment. For a moment she held it, gazing at it in blind bewildered adoration. Then, as though the green scarabæi which were in it had life and sting, and sharply wounded her, she started and shrank a little, and put it quickly down upon the table near.

‘If you please, sir—no,’ she murmured. ‘I’d rather not. I’d rather you’d not think as I could have come for sake of such a thing. I’d nothing to do with finding Puck. Nothing—nothing, indeed.’

And then she turned before he could reply, and darted swiftly from the room, as though if she tarried longer in sight of those glittering scarabæi with their golden clasp, her continence would perish, strangled by desire.

‘Wonders will never cease!’ said Beltran to himself. ‘The town talks of a dead poet instead of

kicking him as a dead ass;—a dog comes back without a thief catching hold of him;—and one of my dancing-girls refuses to take my jewellery! I thought that I knew the world, Puck; but I suppose after all that I don't.'

And with that soliloquy he lighted his cigarette, and went down-stairs to his brougham.





CHAPTER VIII.

PAR-CI ; PAR-LA.

ON the morrow he went out alone, and did not permit me to accompany him.

Hence I knew nothing of how the fates of Bronze and the child Gladys fared in the hands of a man whom the town called a gamester and a libertine.

Ascot followed almost immediately on the night in which I had found her with her dying blue-bells; and we were the guests of its prettiest *maisonette*, all through those gay pleasant sunny days of early June. I often thought of poor Bronze as I watched that brilliant scene from the box of Lady Otho Beaujolais, in which Beltran occupied his

accustomed place, ignoring or defying, with his natural indifferent recklessness, the furies that he thus awakened in Avice Dare, whose box, though he had given five and twenty guineas for it himself, he almost entirely neglected.

She took her vengeance in a curiously characteristic manner. She went shares with the most unlucky and reckless plunger that she knew in all his maddest ventures, and as he (the merest lad) left off a loser by about five thousand, she involved her friend into the payment of one half of that amount: Beltran of course being obliged to disregard the poor boy's courteous protests that 'ladies' losses never counted.'

Altogether that Ascot cost him very heavily, and the social gaiety at his *maisonette*, where the champagne cup seemed to flow in perennity under the lime-trees, and cards to come out of their own accord at evening on the laurustinus terrace, it seemed no marvel if he had altogether forgot his promise to serve a friendless child.

I remarked this to Fanfreluche, who was of course at Ascot with her mistress, and was made much of by her old masters, the First Life.

'My dear,' returned that sapient moralist, 'a

gentleman may forget his appointments, his love vows, and his political pledges ; he may forget the nonsense he talked, the dances he engaged for, the women that worried him, the electors that bullied him, the wife that married him, and he may be a gentleman still ; but there are two things he must never forget, for no gentleman ever does,—and they are, to pay a debt that is a debt of honour, and to keep a promise to a creature that can't force him to keep it. Now, Beltran is a gentleman,—core through.'

By which I suppose she thought that the cause of Gladys and Bronze was safe with him.

We often judge very differently to what you human beings do.

I was once taken into a night-club, where some of the highest play on the town is to be had ; where the men who lounge outside its doorway, on a hot night in the season, are the maddest plungers of their time ; and where those quiet soft-toned patrician voices name the biggest 'coups' of their generation.

'Pick out the best fellow amongst us, little one,' said my patron of the night, who was Clyde Paulette, of the S. F. Guards.

All the men were, as it chanced, almost entire strangers to me; of none of them did I know the character beforehand; but I studied them all one after another, comprehending what was asked of me.

At last I selected one—I cannot tell why—by that peculiar instinct which leads us instantly to a correct diagnosis; and I was greeted by loud shouts of laughter from all present, including the man I signalized.

It seemed that he was known as ‘Ruthless Rhy,’ from his duels, his intrigues, his fatality to married women, and many other wicked sports and pastimes; was indeed looked upon as the very worst lot, in a set as wild as it was thoroughbred.

But though they made such mockery of me for my choice, I adhered to it, and would not alter.

Well—two years later on, this man Vaughan Rhysworth, was martyred in China, when he was on his travels; killed by the most lingering and hideous of deaths. He might have saved himself—might have been living now—if he only would have told one lie. He would not; and he perished. Then men in England, hearing of that death, began to tell to one another many buried things of this

lost life ; and many who had owed him much were full of shame at their long silence, and spoke out their great debts to him ; and the world thrilled strangely at this grand and simple heroism in one who had so long been calumniated and half shunned in its midst. And so it came to pass that they found at length how wisely I had made my choice, and how blindly they had mocked it, in that late summer night in the billiard room when steadfast in my selection I had trusted Ruthless Rhy.

But I wander too far a-field again ; if I stray over all my recollections I shall have you as impatient of me as was Gil Blas of the archbishop's sermon.

Our Ascot week was a very pleasant one—bar its losses in money. These were not limited to the losses on the turf ; they were increased by those at the piquet and écarté tables that stood out after dinner on the laurestinus terrace, which overlooked the close-shaven lime-shaded lawn ; with the cosiest of arm-chairs beside them, and the mellowest of lamps burning near them.

The play was higher and more continual than common in consequence of the presence of the Prince de Ferras, one of Beltran's guests ; a handsome and

witty person, who was the most inveterate and the most fortunate card-player it has ever been my fortune to know. Beltran rather fancied himself at *écarté*, and with justice; for there were few better players than he in his set. But either the Prince was in reality far his superior, or else the run of the cards was too strong for science to change them, for it is certain that in the five Ascot days M. de Ferras won from his host some very enormous stakes.

He was a very rich man too, which made it more provoking.

‘The French were very stupid when they fixed Play in the masculine gender,’ grinned Fanfreluche, sore of heart for her hero. ‘How can it be anything but a woman? see how it smiles on the fullest purse.’

Avice Dare, however, was not like hazard, she did not smile on the courtly de Ferras, who for his part treated her with a cool and even ceremonious manner, which seemed to argue a profound distaste for her.

I remarked this to Fanfreluche; who tilted her ears over her nose with her accustomed gesture of satiric scorn.

‘My dear! how can one tell! I saw a man

once, the whole London season through, so insolently rude to a married woman, that everybody wondered she did not strike him off her visiting-list. Well ! when August came he eloped with her in his yacht to South America. Oh, you can never tell. Men in love are often most intensely disagreeable. They are so mad with themselves for being such fools that they take it out in hard hitting all round.'

'But M. de Ferras,'—I began in a maze.

'Oh, pooh, my dear !' cried Fanfreluche. 'He has robbed his host at cards, and abused his host behind his back : to fulfil the whole duty of a 19th century guest it only remains for him to betray his host in love !'

'You think very ill of men ?' I muttered ; I was indeed slightly weary of her sceptical supercilious treatment of all things ; your pseudo-philosopher, who will always think he has plumbed the ocean with his silver-topped cane, is a great bore sometimes.

'I think very well of men,' returned Fanfreluche. 'You are mistaken, my dear. There are only two things that they never are honest about—and that is their sport and their women. When they get talking of their rocketers, or their runs,

their pigeon-score, or their *bonnes fortunes*, they always lie—quite unconsciously. And if they miss their bird or their woman, isn't it always because the sun was in their eyes as they fired, or because she wasn't half good looking enough to try after?—bless your heart, I know them !'

'If you do you are not complimentary to them,' I grumbled.

'Can't help that, my dear,' returned Fanfre-luche. 'Gracious! Whatever is there that stands the test of knowing it well? I have heard Beltran say, that you find out what an awful humbug the Staubach is when you go up to the top and see you can straddle across it. Well—the Staubach is just like everything in this life. Keep your distance, and how well the creature looks!—all veiled in its spray, and all bright with its prismatic colours, so deep, and so vast, and so very impressive! But just go up to the top—scale the crags of its character, and measure the height of its aspirations, and fathom the torrent of its passions, and sift how much is the foam of speech, and how little is the well-spring of thought—well, my dear! it is a very uncommon creature if it don't turn out just like the Staubach!'

I have since seen the Staubach myself, and don't consider it any finer than the Kinder Scout* of my birthplace ; at that time I was mute ; I was thinking that there were some waters, deep and cool and silent, hidden from human sight, that no man ever fathomed, and that there were such characters likewise.

'Yes, there are,' said Fanfreluche, divining in her curious fashion my unuttered reflection. 'And there are men like them. And I will tell you what there is too,—there is a torrent that flings airiest foam-bells on the wind, and sparkles with gayest colours in the light, and seems to dance and sing all its mirthful hours through, as lightly and as emptily as though it were but a sheet of froth ; and yet beneath, all the while, it is so dark, so deep, so sad, so still, and it only flashes with colour and foam so that none may probe its depths, and none stir its dead that it hides.'

'But, goodness me, I shall be too late to dine at Maidenhead !' she cried, interrupting herself, as though ashamed of her momentary earnestness. 'You know the Brigades have taught them sim-

* Puck means a fall of water in the wild country about the Kinder Scout, the highest summit in the hills of the Peak range. Allowance must be made for his patriotic prejudices. Ed.

plicity there, and the dinners are very good; I don't care for simplicity as a rule; it's the biggest bore and impostor that ever existed, and with women always means limp muslin, weak tea, and a thatched cottage full of rats and earwigs. But when simplicity has the Guards for godfathers, and takes the form of ducks and green peas, or a perfect haunch of venison, I do like her. She's worth all the foreign cooks in the universe!'

And off she went to enjoy it, perched a'top of one of the drags of the household.

Ascot fell very late that year; and as I overheard that we were shortly to go yachting, and afterwards to the German gambling-places, I trembled for the fate of Gladys Gerant and Bronze, notwithstanding the assurances of my little Mentor.

The day she spoke thus was our last day under the lindens and acacias of this pleasant little cottage;—a cottage with a billiard-table, and a croquet-ground, a conservatory, half-a-dozen men-servants, nine o'clock dinners, and a drawing-room in blue velvet.

There are few things more pleasant, I am inclined to believe, than the mixture of Town and Country, judiciously managed. You like the purling murmurs

of a brook all the better, if beside you a delicate burgundy also murmurs out of its jug. You find the odours of the sweet briar and the roses all the sweeter, if they be crossed by the spice-like perfume of your favourite cigarettes.

The song of the nightingales comes more purely and clearly than ever as you sit by the open windows, pushing the wine and the olives around. The hay never smells so fragrantly as when the wind tosses it to you where the five o'clock tea is passing from hand to hand, under the golden-starred pyramids of the blossoming lime trees.

And when the great white moon goes sailing through the dark clouds, above the woods, you think how lovely the night is—as lovely as nights used to be in your boyhood—when leaning over the balcony you are fanned by a jewelled hand ; and lightly chiming across your thoughts come breaks of song, murmurs of laughter, fragments of the world's idlest talk, from those bright chambers within, that you see through the lace of the curtains, and the screen of camellias and myrtles, as you look away from this starry still night, and this fan that stirs like the wing of a bird.

Oh yes, it is well to talk of the mountains and

forests in solitude : take your tent if you will and live roughly, aloft on some barren plateau ; cook your snared bird in a bed of ashes, and lie down to sleep on your pile of heather, and stare at the stars through the rent in your canvas, and stalk out alone in the mists of the dawn. That is very well ; and it is very well you should think so, if you cannot afford any other ; and it is simple and solemn, and grand, and all that. But for pure amusement, my friend,—combine the Town and the Country.

A certain friend of mine went not long ago to pass his *villegiatura* in one of the fairest spots in all Europe. There is a poetic calm about the place that is beautiful exceedingly ; great snow-clad mountains enclose it ; deep darkling lakes sleep in its shadowy woods ; wild pine-woods tower against skies of deepest blue ; boats glide all through the day dreamlike upon its waters ; there is the sound of falling torrents everywhere, and now and then the chime of bells.

He spent seven weeks there : when he lounged into Arthur's again another man asked him how he had enjoyed his time in that happy valley of the Oberland.

‘Well,’ he made answer slowly, with a big cigar in his mouth, ‘we made the time out pretty tolerably. We used to breakfast late ; and we’d get to whist about three in the afternoon, and we’d play on till about two next morning—bar dining, of course. We did that every day. It wasn’t half bad fun. Never had such a steady innings in all my life ; and we’d first-class players. I don’t know that I ever saw better : not even here, nor at the Arlington.’

Now this man, whatever you may think, is neither of an unpoetic temperament, nor of an inartistic mind ; he has, on the contrary, a great deal of feeling and of perception in him ; and for athletic powers, whether in climbing, boating, or walking, he has few rivals. It was not therefore that he was a Peter Bell, to whom every primrose was but a stupid weed : it was only that he wanted his town in his country, and took it,—in the form of a pack of cards.

I think that is the reason why, of all your human pastimes, yachting is the most charming to you.

You have the freedom of the seas, the freshness of the winds ; the width of the waters is round you, and above flashes the silver-winged gull ; life and

its worries lie behind you with that low white shore that has died out of sight ; all debts and all difficulties have been severed with the rope that moored your row-boat to the pier-head. You are away, and are afloat, and are free.

And yet all the luxurious pleasantnesses of the world you have left, are still with you. On the cushioned bench there lies the newest novel, just cut. In the big goblet the lumps of ice float on the golden wine. Screwed upon your deck your whist-table shows its green, tranquil, familiar face. The silky nectarines and the purple grapes lie lazily together on your plate. In the pretty mirrored cabin a choice little dinner will wait you, when the sun goes down ; and, if you be one not happy without this additional toy, there can be also beside you some feminine form clad in the richest and coyest of dresses, that with gold buttons and azure satin and snowy silk so amusingly copies your own sailor's attire. You can strike right across an ocean, and yet can carry the town with you.

Here is the real charm of yachting that makes it the prince of all your pastimes.

To that pastime we went from Ascot ; to the beautiful, graceful, gleaming schooner *Bonniebelle*,

that called my master master also, where she lay on the smooth grey narrow ribbon of the Solent water.

It was such a picturesque existence, I am ashamed to say I forgot everything else in it. Lady Otho was queen on board the *Bonniebelle*—charming Lady Otho, with her pretty haughty head, and her gracious imperial ways, and her soft patrician languor that was sweet as the south wind, after the brusque tyrannies of the *cocottes*.

It was so pleasant there.

Resting all through the night, with the lamps of the opposing shores glistening through the gloom like glowworms through a twilight. Gliding all through the day, with laughter and music and song, and the scent of cigarettes, and the sound of gay careless voices, just crossed by the sailors' shouts and the splash of the severed waters. Staying now and again at nooks in the little Island, where some pretty house was bowered in a nest of red tangled creepers, and a green shadowy lawn sloped down to be lapped by the waves ; and quaint balconies, all leaf-covered, leaned over the white foam-crests. Waiting far into the midnight, while the waltz tunes rang over the beach, and the white dresses here and there flashed through the aisles of syringa

and myrtle; and the lights shone out through dark festoons of foliage, and thickets of tall fuschia; and the glad good-nights were called, gaily from voice to voice; and the cigars were lit, and the boat was pushed off, and the waters rippled under the oars, and the harvest-moon arose, broad and bright, above the silvered sea. Ah!—how pleasant the life was!—the old sweet life that is dead!

In it I could discern no sign that my master had remembered the child Gladys. Only once did I fancy that he had spoken of her.

The Bonniebelle had run far down channel; it was a very sultry afternoon; the sky was cloudless, and the sails hung motionless in the hot dry air. Lady Otho reclined under her awning, lovely beyond compare with a gorgeous feather fan in her hand.

Beltran had been talking more seriously to her than usual; and those two, whose attachment was of the serenest and the most passionless sort, now seemed for the moment almost to have approached—a quarrel.

‘*You turning knight-errant, Vere!*’ I heard her say, as I drew near to listen; and there was a smile on her lips new there, and not sweet. ‘Ah, “je ne crois pas les miracles excepté en foi!”’

‘Believe or not, as you like,’ answered Beltran, as he rose from his seat and lighted a cigarette.

‘Some women are awfully good to us, Ned,’ he muttered a few minutes later to Lord Guilliadene. ‘But how bitter bad the best of them are to their own sex !’

‘Awfully bad,’ assented the handsome Earl, brewing himself a pick-me-up. ‘What’s amiss with Alice Beaujolais ? You’ve ruffled her somehow, haven’t you ?’

‘Not I,’ said Beltran. ‘It’s the weather.’

But I do not think it was the weather, oppressive though the heat and the calm might be. I think he had been speaking to her of the story of Gladys, and seeking to interest her in it—vainly.

I suppose I shall be considered very heterodox if I write a thing that I really believe ; but I do believe it ; and it is this—that men are much softer at heart than women.

Oh, I know men can be hard enough ; they can swear savagely on occasions ; they can hit mercilessly when they are minded ; they can be like steel or granite to a woman whom they have ceased to care about : I know that. But for all that they are never hard with the chill, contented, egotistic,

lifelong brutality of women. 'Apres moi le déluge !'—that is a woman all over. If the Pompadour did not say it, she ought to have done.

Lucretius has said how charming it is to stand under a shelter in a storm, and see another hurrying through its rain and wind : but a woman would refine that sort of cruelty, and would not be quite content unless she had an umbrella beside her that she refused to lend.

I get very out of patience when I hear of the tenderness of women ; they are only tender just for themselves and their belongings,—as tigresses and bears are. They have no notion of any impersonal sympathy. Men you can move by a thousand things—their imaginations, their affections, their chivalries, their follies, their intelligence, their perception,—what you will. But a woman can only be moved by just one thing alone—her own private interests.

Women always put me in mind of that bird of yours, the cuckoo.

Your poetry and your platitudes have all combined to attach a most sentimental value to cuckoos and women. All sorts of pretty phantasies surround them both ; the spring-tide of the year,

the breath of early flowers, the verse of old dead poets, the scent of sweet summer rains, the light of bright dewy dawns—all these things you have mingled with the thought of the cuckoo, till its first call through the woods in April brings all these memories with it. Just so in like manner have you entangled your poetic ideals, your dreams of peace and purity, all divinities of patience and of pity, all sweet saintly sacrifice and sorrow, with your ideas of women.

Well—cuckoos and women, believe me, are very much like each other, and not at all like your phantasy:—to get a well-feathered nest without the trouble of making it, and to keep easily in it themselves, no matter who may turn out in the cold, is both cuckoo and woman all over; and, while you quote Herrick and Wordsworth about them as you walk in the dewy green wood, they are busy slaying the poor lonely fledglings, that their own young may lie snug and warm.

Allons ! I shall be told, I suppose, that it is very easy (and therefore ignoble) to satirize women. It *is* easy, no doubt—just as Pasquinades were easy in the corruption of Borgian Rome; just as epigrams were easy in the vileness of Bourbonic France.

Had Rome been virtuous or France pure, Pasquin's pillar would have been blank, and Figaro's mouth been silent.

After the yachting there came the playing places in Germany; and after those there came the shooting: the latter at a variety of houses, in a variety of counties. Our servant, who was, as I have said, a notable exception to his class, and had taken me greatly into his affections, bore me about through all these manifold changes; and though his master and mine laughed at him for cumbering himself with me, Beltran never offered any serious opposition to my presence wherever he went.

It seemed to me the hardest work that ever men set themselves, that inveterate 'gunning' from sunrise to sunset: that incessant unremitting assiduity with which they devoted themselves to the slaughter of birds without any pause or breathing space, save in that one hour when the hot luncheon smoked under the nut-coppice, and the champagne cup was drunk where the great curling ferns shielded the mouse and the wren.

But the share that I had in it was pleasant enough. Sometimes we were at great country-houses, filled with fashionable gatherings; some-

times we were at those grand ducal mansions that stand amidst the gorse and bracken of the midland shires ; sometimes we were at his own place, a gray rambling old baronial pile, set in the heart of the green meadows, and the beechen woods, and the drowsy hawthorn lanes, of Bucks.

There were always women, of course ; dainty dames and demoiselles of the world of fashion. Alice Beaujolais being always invited with the same circle of guests as Beltran, with that curious tacit recognition and condonation of such a liaison which people always accord while the woman is ' in society,' and which contrasts so comically with their virtuous ostracism of her if she once be fool enough to blunder into an open scandal, and the columnus of the newspapers.

' My dear, she goes everywhere ; she attends the Drawing-rooms, you know ; and her own people visit her. It would be ridiculous for us to object.'—I have heard titled women say this hundreds of times of great ladies of their own order, whom they knew to be guilty of the vilest of intrigues, and the foulest of sensualities, and whose ' connections' were as notorious to their own set as though they had ben pilloried in a market-place. And they never

did object accordingly, but asked each aristocratic sinner with her favourite 'friend' of the moment, in the very kindest and most charitable manner possible.

If a silly idiot mismanaged her matters, and created scandal by getting into the divorce court, or by irritating a long-suffering society with some folly that it was quite impossible for society to be blind to, of course it was a different thing. They 'objected' then with all imaginable severity, and combined their forces to drive forth the foolish one from the sacred precincts of an outraged community.

Lady Otho, therefore, being a woman of an exquisite tact, and taking care to be always *au mieux* with her husband, (a sensible creature likewise, who thought that in the matter of condonation it was always best to 'give and take,') went to all the houses that Beltran went to, and carried on her 'platonic' with him with the most admirable ease. She deigned to take much notice of myself; and though she declined to accept me when offered to her, petted me habitually very much, as she usually did the youngest and sauciest addition to her 'pretty pages,' from the cornet-list of the Brigades.

I never knew quite whether I liked her—how can you with those women of the world? She was kind and insincere; she was gentle and she was cruel; she was generous and ungenerous; she was true as steel, and she was false as Judas—what would you?—she was a woman of the world, with several sweet natural impulses, and all a coquette's diplomacies.

She tended me with the greatest solicitude one day that autumn, when I had run a thorn into my foot: and the very next day, when I was well again, she laughed to see me worried on the lawn by a bull-terrier. If you have not met a woman like that, I wonder where you have lived.

However, as a rule I enjoyed myself amongst those fair patricians in the various houses we visited. I played with their wools and floss silks; tore their yellow-papered novels, and stept on their velvet or silken skirts at my fancy, in the mornings; strolled after them in the conservatories and rose gardens; was curled on their folded plaids when they graced the pheasant or grouse drives with their presence; and learned to care for the bang of the breech-loaders, and the risk of a shot, as little as they cared when a brave old cock bird staggered dead through

the smoke, and they watched how the wagers they had laid in gloves went.

Then when luncheon came on the sturdy gray pony's back, and they dispossessed me of their plaids to stretch themselves thereon, they would toss me foie gras, and truffles, and biscuits; while nonsense, 'delicious thing, like the bubble from a spring,' and laughter, and stories, and half-gay, half-sad fragments of vague sentiment, floated with the smoke of the cigarettes, and the scent of the delicate burgundies, amongst the yellow furze and the wet mosses, and the big dock leaves of the bank, up to the branches of the nut-tree hedge, where amongst the half-reddened foliage the linnet would be singing her latest, and the robin his earliest, song.

It was pleasant, very pleasant, and in these bright, careless, sport-filled days of autumn, there seemed no time in which to remember Bronze and Gladys. I forgot:—and I supposed that he forgot also.

When I met Fanfreluche again, she scoffed at me severely for this. She came to stay with her mistress at that old place of Beltran's in the beech-woods of Bucks. He was seldom there except in

the shooting season ; it appeared that his fortune was too impoverished for him to be able to sustain the enormous expenses which a nobleman's open house and great establishment involve.

When he went down to the place it was in a half-bohemian, half-bivouac fashion, that yet was perhaps pleasanter than any other, in the old dim, picturesque, historic house, with its oak-panelled rooms, and its stained windows, and its shady grass terraces, with their dark cedars. For though he called it roughing it, the roughness was only of the most artistic sort ; with a perfect cook, and perfect wines, and perfect cigars ; with wondrous old gold plate, and fabulous antiques, and paintings, and china, all around ; and a grand piano in the Elizabethan drawing-room, and the clash of billiard balls under the painted arches of the Chapel entrance, and whist-tables in the little Garden room, that looked through oriel windows on to the terraces and the cedars.

Here Lady Otho came not ; and the society somewhat scandalized the county.

I suppose he thought that the demi-monde best suited that indolent, irregular, half-bohemian existence ; and that when his guests and he came

trooping in through the twilight, from the golden woods, and the broad bistre fallows, into that strange old place, it was easier to be able to lounge into dinner in their velvet shooting dress ; it was easier to be able to talk whatever impudent mischief came uppermost ; it was easier to be able to brush a kiss from a cheek as coolly, and with as little pardon asked, as when brushing the bloom off a peach. It was easier certainly : and they were wont to declare that the ultimate practice of both *mondes* was the same, it was their theories only that differed. And when you come in tired from a long day's shooting, and indisposed for more exertion than to drink your wine and to light your cigar, it is easier to have to do with women who have no theories. For, at any rate, the theorists expect you to put on your dress coat, and to keep awake after dinner.

By the way, permit me, in parenthesis, to say that one of the chief causes of that preference for the demi-monde which you daily and hourly discover more and more, is the indulgence it shows to idleness. Because your lives are so intense now, and always at high pressure,—for that very reason are you more indolent also in little things. It bores

you to dress ; it bores you to talk ; it bores you to be polite. Sir Charles Grandison might find ecstasy in elaborating a bow, a wig, or a speech ; you like to give a little nod, cut your hair very short, and make ‘ awfully ’ do duty for all your adjectives.

‘ *Autres temps, autres mœurs.* ’ You are a very odd mixture. You will go to the ends of the earth on the scent of big game ; but you shirk all social exertion with a cynical laziness. You will come from Damascus at a stretch without sleeping, and think nothing of it ; but you find it a wretched thing to have to exert yourself to be courteous in a drawing-room.

Therefore the demi-monde suits you with a curious fitness, and suits you more and more every year. I am afraid it is not very good for you. I don’t mean for your morals ; I don’t care the least about them, I am a dog of the world ;—I mean for your manners. It makes you slangy, inert, rude, lazy. And yet—what perfect gentlemen you can be still, and what grace there is in your careless weary ease, when you choose to be courteous : and you always *do* choose, that I must say for you, when you find a woman who is really worth the trouble.

Fanfreluce, who came thither with Avice Dare,

took me to task, as I say, for my supposition that Beltran had forgotten his promise. She insisted that he had not done so, however appearances might betoken.

‘He hasn’t forgotten,’ she assured me again and again; and with much force, one Sunday afternoon, when there was no gunning, and everybody was out on the terrace in the warm golden October afternoon, reading novels, playing écarté, drinking seltzers, chanting glees, sauntering under the great old cedars: while the crimsoned woods stretched away in the sunlight, and the creepers glowed scarlet where they trailed over the stone balustrade.

‘Gentlemen don’t forget: not that sort of thing I mean. Now, you look there at Neil Strathalan—there—he’s pouring out the claret cup for Laura. Beastly stuff, that those tom-fools of the butler’s pantry poke cucumber, and lemon, and spice, and brandy, and every abomination, into! As though wine weren’t bad enough by itself.’

I looked at Neil Strathalan as she spoke: he was one of the men staying with us; an ex-guardsman; a duke’s son; a handsome, worn, reckless, indolent-looking man of the world, of whom I had seldom heard anything good.

‘I know what a bad fellow everybody thinks my Lord Neil. And he does go awfully fast ; that I grant. Plunges ; turns night into day ; makes love to no end of married women ; does everything that he ought not to do. Well—I’ll tell you a thing I know about Neil. It happened a long time ago, when I belonged to the Brigades. There was a man alive at that time called Maurice Drysdale ; he was a great friend of Neil’s, and they were always together. Poor Maurice was thoroughbred all over, but he was fearfully poor ; he went the pace like all of them, and he hadn’t stay in him for it ; and he broke down—utterly : fortune, and body, and mind. He got abroad to avoid arrest, and he died abroad at a little fishing town in Norway.

‘Neil Strathalan was yachting at that time in the northern waters ; and he just reached in time to see the last of one of the handsomest, bravest, truest gentlemen that ever was killed by plunging. I was with him, and I saw Maurice too, lying in that little, pent, dark, close chamber, with its scent of fish, and of tar, and of salt water ; and with the endless sound of the sea coming in through the square hole in the wall, which was all that served him as casement.

‘I can see him now, with his frank fair face, and his bright chestnut curls, and his great massive limbs that had, so little a while before, owned all the strength of giants, and now were stretched there powerless as a child’s, and with the life ebbing out of them as the tide ebbed off the shore. His eyes were growing very dim, but he knew Neil.

‘He looked up at him with his old sweet smile, and found force to grasp his hand. “You’ll take care of Ailie,” he murmured. “Poor little Ailie! She’ll be safe with you, Neil? You’ll look after her, won’t you? her and the child?”’

‘Neil clenched his hand in both his own: “By God I will!”—and as he said it the last wave of the tide rolled off the shore, and the last breath died on Maurice Drysdale’s lips. And Neil—ah! do you know what a man’s grief is to see?

‘Ailie Grattan was a mere girl, eighteen years I think at most, and she had loved Maurice with all a woman’s passion, and much more than most women’s fealty. He had met her in a summer-tour about the Irish lakes; it had been the old story, the Faust-story that the world loves to condemn, whilst it leaves unarraigned the Messalinas of its palaces. She was far lovelier, truer, and more tender, than

most Gretchens are. Dying there, his last thought had been of Ailie—poor little Ailie—as defenceless, as lonely, and almost as innocent as any one of the heaths on her native mountains. For he had kept her in perfect seclusion, and had never let a gross word or a coarse glance light near her. Yet he had died alone—well, because such men will ; they drag themselves out to solitude like stricken stags.

‘ Do you think Neil forgot his promise, or not ? Perhaps you will confess that I know something more of men than you do, when I tell you that no sister was ever dealt with more loyally, tenderly, and reverently, than is his dead friend’s darling dealt with by Neil Strathalan. Ailie lives in utter solitude, giving herself up to the care of her son, and to the memory of her lost and unforgotten love. All want, all hardship, all anxiety, are spared her ; and she, absorbed in one remembrance, hardly heeds, scarcely knows, all that she and her child owe to Neil. As for words of shame or passion, he would no more breathe them to her than he would lift his hand to slay her.

‘ Once when his visits to her got bruited about, (for all things are seen and told in this day !) the world, which is always so vile of thought

that it deems all men must be vile of deed also, said that this man was worse even than it had called him; that ere his comrade was cold in his grave he sought the dead man's mistress as his own. Neil smiled when he heard that they said this. He knew—I know—that sacred to him as the name of his mother, were the trust of his friend, and his promise.'

I said nothing; I felt that she spoke truth; although of Neil Strathalan I saw nothing save an evil, careless, hard, good-looking man, whose speech was very caustic, and whose life was very lazy, and whose ways and works were, as the world said, all of wickedness.

Fanfreluche, ashamed again of having suffered herself to feel—unwise shame, that she had caught up from her friends of the Clubs and the Row,—trotted off, shaking her bells to beg for bonbons from Beltran. Whether she was right about his memory of the child Gladys I knew not; and events soon took place which thrust all speculations on it out of my head.



CHAPTER VIII.

VENDETTA.

THE Coronet was of course far too fashionable a theatre to be open during the months when the town was a desert.

Hapless amateurs would indeed now and again disport themselves upon its stage, and some crazed creature would perchance ruin himself with a 'Shakesperian revival,' or an 'Opera for the Million,' in those dusty, desolate months when the clubs were tenantless and the park was a prairie. But its own people knew it no more.

Mrs Delamere went to the Baths, sweeping from Spa to Homburg, and from Homburg to Baden, at her fancy, changing her dress three times a day,

wearing the costliest of Worth's costumes, throwing the Astolat gold away at the tables, and holding her pretty classic head as proudly as any Queen Regnant or Empress amongst them all. And so did likewise such of her wise sisterhood, as, nominally dancing at the Coronet, actually spent in three months the fortune of any young baronet, or coronet of the brigades, who thought it manly and fashionable to have their brazen chignons beside him in his phaeton, and to pay for their ball at Willis's Rooms or their big dinner at Richmond.

As for the luckless ones who either had not a pretty face to attract the stalls, or else were foolish enough to cling to some poor shred of self-respect and honesty, they of course went in the dead season to east-end theatres and music-halls, or to a toilsome tour about the provinces; and spent their sultry summer amongst the grit and dust of stifling cities, paying thus in murk and misery, and continual toil, for their ignorance in not perceiving that the only horn of plenty is held fast in the hands of vice.

With the early days of November the glories of the Coronet revived, and were to revive with more extravagance than usual this season: with a new burlesque, gorgeous in the extreme, and of

enormous cost, in which the darling of the public was to delight it with even less drapery and more jigs than ever.

It was much talked of during the shooting-time, and as no pains or expense had been spared in the preparation of it, so great results were expected from its production.

Denzil had often urged my master to sever his connection with the theatre, but Beltran had never been induced to do so.

‘Amateur management is worse than plunging,’ Denzil had said one night on the grass-terrace in the shooting season. ‘Farquhar of the old Royal Buskin makes his fortune by a theatre, and why? Because he is a clever man of business, who supplies the town with amusement as a mere matter of commerce, just as a publican does beer. He has been at it all his days, is not troubled with scruples, and is as hard as nails to boot. He would never allow a pretty pale piece of inanity to murder a fine bit of “leading business,” as I have known you to do, because the piece of inanity was young and poor, and wept bitterly, and prayed of you to treat her like a star. And he would, on the contrary, take his twenty or thirty sovereigns a week from any dainty

dame of Casino celebrity, whose " friends " would pay to get her on to the boards, whose dresses would be ninety guineas each, and all stiff with golden brocade, and whose admirers would fill the stalls and muster strong and often in the private boxes. Now, as for you!—you bade Wynch keep on that wretched woman Berthald because the woman was old and was ugly and could ill find engagements; you insisted on little Lacy being retained because she was only seventeen and had not a shilling in the world, when you knew she broke down in the mere letter, with every fifth word she spoke; you allowed that wild German, Waldenvorst, to rant in Knotzebue and Shakespeare, because you found him a scholar, and a poet, and a beggar, and God knows what all besides; you never give yourself the trouble of having the accounts audited by any public accountant; and you never give yourself the chance of making money by the only paying places in the house, because you are always lending stalls to any man that wants them, and always offering the boxes to every pretty creature that you meet. Night after night I have seen every private box filled with women of our set, to whom you had given them, and who only came there to flirt, and to chatter,

and to yawn a little, and to have cups of tea sent them in from your room ! ’

Beltran smiled.

‘ Go on, pray ! The recollection of the tea seems to excite you rather. As far as I can remember, the wine that the Press drinks is the bigger item.’

‘ And I have seen,’ pursued Denzil, regardless of the interruption, ‘ the very best actresses you ever had snubbed out of the theatre by that woman yonder. I have known the poor girls actually surrender their engagements rather than endure the insolence of her abominable injuries. When she is called at rehearsal she is always absent : inquire, and you find she is “bored,” and gone to her brougham, and so are Dora Delany and Vic Villiers just because you give them high wages, to oblige Annesley and Fred Orford, though neither of the girls has a grain of talent, or sense, or decency even ; and both have their “brougham,” and can snap their fingers at fines ! Then, when the first night comes, you wonder they are not letter-perfect, and that the prompter’s is almost the only voice heard.’

‘ You are hard to please, Derry,’ said Beltran, with a smile. ‘ I am wrong when I take penniless virtue, and wrong when I take independent vice !

Pray go on, it is delightful to hear you. In Gertrude d'Eyncourt's time you weren't so severe on that poor old Roi d'Yvetot—the stage.'

'Like most Rois d'Yvetot, it pays its ministers with a senile laugh, and starves its public while it crams its courtesans.'

'Don't be so fearfully epigrammatic. An epigram is a truffle of truth, dished up in a soufflée of superciliousness. Your antagonism to the poor theatre—'

'I have no antagonism to any theatre. I have a very bitter antagonism to women who order their lover to take one, as they bid him buy them a £5000 diamond locket, careless how he may pay for their toy with his ruin; women who, without one shred of talent, grace, or learning, seek it simply as the arena on which to show their forms, and display their diamonds, dress at their rivals, and put themselves up for sale. It is as utterly disastrous for a gentleman to become an impresario as it is for him to become a builder. Where the adept makes a fortune, the amateur only rushes to ruin. A theatre is a most ruinous toy for any man of your temper and tastes. Is the game worth the millions of candles you burn at both ends for it? For the life

of me, I can't see what you get in return for your money? Only the obligation to give dinners, and suppers, to actresses whose genius lies in their legs or their hair, and comedians whose facetiæ are even staler and more intolerable over the claret jug than before the floats; only the necessity to mingle in a society inferior to your own, composed of people who, whilst they supplicate you with unblushing impudence for your invitations, curse you behind your back, because you are what they call a swell! People who submit to your contempt for the sake of your champagnes, and who tout you for Richmond or Greenwich dinners, while they hate you like poison for the mere tone of your voice, the mere cut of your coats, the mere cost of the flower in your buttonhole!'

Beltran laughed, and got up from his seat.

'You're awfully good fun, Derry, when one does get a rise out of you. Perhaps I shall please even you with an actress one day—*qui vivra verra*. There's the dinner-bell. The cook sent me word that he's invented a new style of jumping mushrooms in wine, which he thinks we shall pronounce very great in its way. Come along.'

In this wise was Denzil's advice always dis-

regarded ; and we went to town for the first night of this splendid piece ; many of Beltran's own set—men and women both—did likewise, although it was early winter, and fashionable London was still desolate. It was to be produced on a Saturday night, and he went up in the afternoon of that day, having asked some score of critics and literati to a dinner on the morrow at the Leviathan—the one hotel in London where the clarets are what they call themselves, and the innumerable *nuances* of choice fish are studied, and the artichoke and the tomato are comprehended to be as equal in import, and as different, as a fugue of Bach and an overture of Rossini.

Laura Pearl had been in London some two weeks or so, rehearsing ; and the extravaganza was entirely to her glory ; for notwithstanding its magnificence, its cost, and its reputed worth, as a thing actually of esprit, it was well understood that its chief attraction for the town would lie in the fact of its being written chiefly to exhibit a soulless, shameless, mindless woman, who had a fairer face and a more notorious infamy than any other : or at least had the good fortune to have them more talked about.

‘If there were a Garrick on the stage, the stalls would vote him bad form, yawn, and go away to their carriages or their clubs. But they will flock night after night to see Pearl, half-dressed, jump about in a breakdown,’ said Fanfreluche. ‘The fascination Pearls, or anything at all treating of them, possess for society is a very odd feature of society.* It is a fact—there is no disputing it—that the public are as eager to see the worst woman of her year as they would be to see the greatest hero that ever lived. A theatre will fill from pit to roof if only a cruel courtesan will show on its boards. A girl’s photograph will sell like wildfire if she be only known to be absolutely infamous. People in the Park gaze after Laura Pearl or Lilian Lee with as curious a wonder and reverence as if they gazed after a Jeanne d’Arc or a Vivia Perpetua. Honourable women name them openly, and study their dress, and put their pictures in their albums. They have their opera box and their pew at church; they are copied in their coiffures, and they are asked for their patronage to charities. It

* This was in the printer’s hands before the *Fermosa* audiences gave fresh evidence of the accuracy of M^{lle} Fanfreluche’s observations.—ED.

is awfully odd—this deification of degradation ! Where will it end, I wonder ?—Ah, where will it, indeed ? Well ! I suppose it will end in their apotheosis. They have got to the Lawn : they will get to Hurlingham : and then I suppose there won't be a reasonable doubt but what they'll get also to Heaven !'

Which was profane of Fanfreluche, but pardonable : for if she placed Heaven latest and highest in her estimate of the triad, it is certainly more than most ladies seem to do.

I contrived to slip, unseen, down to the Coronet on this Saturday night. We arrived there towards the end of a witty, graceful old comedy,—which formed the *lever du rideau*. Beltran went almost at once to the box of Alice Beaujolais, and thence to other people he knew in the house. I remained behind.

The comedy soon came to an end. Maude Delamere swept off in a superb dress, and an injured frame of mind ; martyred indeed she might well feel, as the house had been only one-third full until her last act ; and she was well worth seeing in her comedies, despite the *Midas* sneers at her.

It was half-past nine : the time for the burlesque.

‘Where on earth is Laura?’ said Beltran, coming in from the front of the house, where he had been conversing with some friends.

‘It’s a quarter past her time,’ said Denzil, who was flirting a little with Mrs Delamere as he put her carriage-cloak round her.

Beltran went across and rapped on the panels of the Pearl’s dressing-room door; silence following, he pushed it open. The little chamber was empty.

The music had burst out afresh, and succeeded in amusing the audience. They played through the whole of the *Bronze Horse* overture; when it was ended she had not made her appearance.

Beltran smoked a cigar with apparent indifference, but his eyes grew angry.

The gods of the gallery began to raise an uproar; they stamped, and kicked, and whistled, and screamed scratches of song.

‘Time’s up!’ they holloaed.

‘’Tis, by Jove!’ muttered Denzil. ‘Shall I go and look for her, Beltran?’

‘Let the call-boy go.’

The call-boy went.

The orchestra—gallant defenders of the stormed

breach—burst bravely into a ringing waltz of Offenbach.

But the gods had heard enough of melody, and preferred their own tuneful screechings; they would not hearken to their Orpheus with his flourished bâton. They shouted, and hissed, and swore, and kicked, and screamed out snatches of the vilest music-hall comic ballads.

The stalls yawned visibly; the women in the private boxes rose.

Beltran, with his cigar in his teeth, looked pale with anger. But he said nothing; silence was his second nature in any crisis; he abhorred people who 'ruffled ill.'

'Let me go on and sing, sir!' said a little musical, feverish voice at his elbow. 'They cotton to me, you know, my lord; and p'rhaps I'd keep 'em quiet?'

He looked kindly down on Nellie as she approached him. She had been allotted a good part in the coming burlesque, and was radiant in the gauze and gold, the glittering wings, and the starry crown, of a fairy's best Paris costume.

'You're a good child. Well—go.'

She tripped on to the stage at his order, and

burst without preface or trepidation into a charming little slang-song. It was utter nonsense, but it had gay, airy music to it; the musicians knew it, and took up its burden at her first bars; the gods welcomed her with rapture and growling intermixed. The song was a success—and a truce—for the moment.

‘While they’re quiet I’ll get Alice away. They may grow noisy,’ murmured Beltran.

A second or two later I saw him, through the flies, in a private box where sat, with her party, Lady Otho Beaujolais.

‘What an ass!’ swore Denzil, regarding him as he placed her cachemires round the great lady’s shoulders, and led her from the box. ‘To give the signal himself to empty his own house!’

‘What on earth did you do that for, Vere?’ he asked, when Beltran, returning to the scene of warfare, calmly re-lit another cigar.

‘Lady Otho hates rows,’ he said briefly.

‘And you think there’ll be one?’

‘Must be.’

He leaned his back against one of the upright beams, and waited.

There were a frightful confusion and tumult

around him ; prompters, scene painter, old Wynch, the luckless players, all the numberless supers and machinists of a fashionable theatre, were wild with exultation and agitation. Still he said nothing ; but his face grew pale, and I did not care to look up at the gleam in his darkening grey eyes.

There was still no appearance of Laura Pearl, nor of any apology from her.

‘ Surely must be ill ? ’ hazarded Denzil.

‘ She’d have sent in that case,’ said her lover, his feelings undisturbed by the suggestion.

To commence the piece without her was impossible ; the first scene entirely, and almost solely, depended on the absentee.

The gallant little Wood-Elf, a heroine to the core, recommended her singing with a daring and persistence worthy of the *Vieille Garde* itself. But her charming could charm no longer ; almost all the respectable part of the house had followed when Beltran had led out his peeress ; some men in the stalls alone remained. But the crowd in the two upper tiers and the pit still were there ; and their howling and hooting sounded as though demons themselves were unloosed.

The Wood-Elf ran off breathless.

‘Oh, my lord ! I’m afeard—I am indeed—that they’ll get chucking something at me !’

‘Dress and run off home,’ answered Beltran.
‘I’ll thank you to-morrow, Nellie.’

The girl’s eyes flashed and danced, and her young cheeks were in flame beneath their rouge.

‘I don’t want thanking, sir,’ she whispered.
‘Might I please stay and see it out ?’

Ere he could attend to or answer her, the call-boy rushed in ; gasping for utterance.

‘Well ?’ said Beltran, imperiously.

‘If you please, sir,’ palpitated the hapless Mercury, who was in mortal terror at the message he brought, ‘if you please, my lord, she’ve a bin out since five, and she han’t bin back, my lord. But they ses as how this ere was left, and was to be sint when you sint arter her.’

And the boy tremblingly tendered a note.

Beltran, with his face as calm as an alabaster mask, tore open the letter.

Long afterwards I knew that letter ran thus :—

‘You’re a clever fellow, Beltran ; but you’re a fool all the same. Don’t tell a woman again you can get as good as her for breakdowns with

whistling for 'em. When you get this I shall be off to Paris with the Prince de Ferras. If you think me worth fighting about—well, he's a deal better shot nor you ; I saw that with the rocketers. I hope your new piece will be a hit to-night. But I guess it won't work very smooth. Yours no longer,

‘LAURA.’

As he read his face changed terribly ; but it was only for a moment : he recovered himself instantly, and crushed the note up in his hand.

‘She will not be here at all to-night,’ he said simply to the men around him, without a tremour either of passion or emotion in his voice. ‘Tell the people, Wynch, that the piece is put off ; and return them their money—doubled—at the doors.’

Wynch only stared anxiously at him.

‘Damn you, sir ! do you hear me ?’ said his master, calmly still, but with an accent in his voice which sent the wicked old man to obedience as fast as his legs could carry him.

‘You may all of you go home now,’ Beltran continued to the actors and actresses, who stood like scared sheep about him. ‘Attend here to-

morrow, at noon, as usual. Your salaries will continue.'

Then he put his hand on Denzil's arm.

'Come out with me, Derry.'

They turned to go; but at that moment the announcement that Wynch was making, in lieu of conciliating the people, only exasperated them. In the tumult of their rage they scarcely heard the offer of the double money, but only incensed at the deprivation of their evening's amusement—for at this house the drama counted for nothing, and the burlesque for everything,—they became utterly unmanageable in the pit and gallery, and howled like a herd of hyænas.

'Clear the house!' cried Beltran, his voice ringing firm and imperious out as he paused, and abandoned his intention of quitting the scene.

'Easier said than done!' muttered Denzil.

'We shall have a free fight,' laughed Paget Desmond. 'I'm agreeable.'

'Call police, and clear the house,' said Beltran again, unheeding alike the terror of his actors and the chaff of his friends.

Old Wynch, before the fallen curtain, continued to shriek his entreaties to the public, all in vain.

The roughs were strong in numbers, and rampant in injured feeling. They saw an exquisite opportunity for their vengeance, and the temptation to seize it proved irresistible. Pit and gallery rose on one impulse; hooting like owls, roaring like tigers, and set to work to damage and demolish everything that they could reach and seize.

The half-dozen men remaining in the stalls left their seats and came round to us by a passage which, as they were privileged frequenters of the wings, they knew by heart.

‘House will be wrecked,’ muttered Denzil. ‘I’ll swear she’s sent a score of lambs in here on order.’

As he spoke, Beltran—forgetful that his name had never appeared to the public in connection with the Coronet since it was ostensibly licensed by the Chamberlain to old Wynch—left the flies, and, displacing his manager, stood himself before the footlights.

‘At the doors you will get your money doubled. I regret you have lost your night’s amusement, but I will make you what amends I can,’ he said to the infuriated mob, while his voice penetrated to the farthest corner of the theatre. ‘As to your rioting, I

shall not permit it; quit the house at once, or the law shall force you.'

For an instant they were too amazed at his unexpected and unexplained appearance to speak; but the pause lasted only that one fleeting second; the next the very calmness and contempt of his attitude and address infuriated them the more.

'Curse the swell,' roared a gigantic bully, who seemed to urge on the affray. 'Will ye give over a rare lark just for *his* cheek, lads?'

The words were the signal for a terrific onslaught. The men became lunatics, possessed and loosed; they tore the curtains down, they wrenched away the gilded scroll-work of the balconies, they broke the glass of the gas burners, they pulled up the benches, and used them as levers and as mallets to work more destruction; they wreaked their rage upon the inanimate, harmless things, as a mob, once seized with the devil of ruin, always does in its blind rabies.

'The beasts!' swore Beltran under his breath. In another instant he and the four or five men of his own class who were behind the scenes, had sprung across the orchestra-box, vacated in a rush by the terrified bandsmen, and were in the midst of the crowd and the worst of the combat.

I, as though the blood of all the mastiffs flowed furiously in my veins, stood with leonine courage before the floats, and barked my loudest, till I thought that I should shake the house down, Samson-like, on friends and foes in one.

I have since been told that my loudest does not rise one note higher than the smallest wail of a penny trumpet, but this I do not believe. Fanfre-luche has said it, and, besides the notorious fact that no female creature ever acknowledges excellence in what she has not done herself, it is well known that all earthquaking thunders, whether of the orator's voice or the hero's cannon, are invariably pooh-poohed by those jealous of them, as the mere collapsing crack of broken windbags.

I must, however, in veracity, grant that the fulminations of my wrath took little perceivable effect upon the combatants. The roughs, of whom there were this night unusual numbers in pit and gallery for this fashionable theatre, had begun wild work, and appeared only the more resolved to prosecute it to its worst issues, because 'the swells' endeavoured to prevent them. No scarlet-clothed Matador ever more furiously enraged an Estremaduran bull than did the sight of these eight or ten men in evening

dress infuriate the sweeps, and costermongers, and butcher-boys, and counter-jumpers, who had commenced the sack of the Coronet. 'The gentlemen,' hitting out straight with their old Oxford science, looked so cool, so tranquil, so contemptuous; and the roughs, hot, and dirty, and clamorous, and clumsy, were so thoroughly conscious of that immeasurable difference betwixt themselves and their adversaries, and hence grew only madder, fiercer, coarser, and more brutal. It was a duel of Class in its way; and bitter, as class warfare ever must be: with disdain on one side, and hatred on the other.

Beltran and his friends were but as one against a score, a little knot of silent scornful men forcing their way, shoulder to shoulder, against a furious, yelling, tumultuous crowd; levelling their blows with fearful force when they did strike, and thinking, it seemed, less of saving the theatre from its wreckers than of chastising the audacity of the mob towards themselves. There were only ten of them, and there were some three hundred of the rioters; yet I felt the little Courcy girl was right as she cried breathlessly to the prompter, crouching terrified in his den, 'Ten thousand to nothin' on the swells, Davy; they'll beat, they'll beat, they'll beat!'

But Davy, crouching in his hood-like box, was far too white and frightened to accept or even hear the wager.

Meantime, every available weapon that could be torn or twisted out of wood and metal work, the mob seized and used. Fragments of gilded mouldings, of shattered glass, of coloured plaster, of carved decorations, flew hurtling through the air. There was not an unbroken gas globe left in the whole house. The central chandelier hung unhurt indeed aloft, but all its glittering glass stars and rays fell crashing to the floor under the missiles hurled against it. Howling, stamping, and struggling, they wreaked their passion on all things within their reach.

Never a word spoke Beltran, but he acted as his Order always acts when, out from the serenity and impassiveness of habit and of temper, the fire of a sudden furious scorn breaks into flame. The roughs went down like felled oxen before him, no stroke went home so surely and so cruelly as his, and here and there a rioter, glancing up and catching the look in his eyes, crouched, though unstruck, like a lashed hound before him. The mob knew by instinct that this man contemned them

utterly ; and would never fear them,—knew also that though his property was being destroyed before his eyes, there was a certain fierce, cool, sweet delight in the mere sense of combat that had both pleasure and passion in it for the quiet aristocrat.

The actors and actresses had all fled away aghast by the stage-doors, the workmen and other people of the place hung aloof amongst the wings, unwilling to come forward, no constables had as yet arrived ; there was only Nellie, who kept her ground and watched the issue of the night with an intense absorption into which no selfish fears had power to intrude. In all her fluttering gossamer, and golden glisten, and winged fairyism, painted and tinselled and spangled, she yet stood there with so much of youth, of eagerness, of fear, of vivid feeling and of tortured pain upon her face, that all the art and artifice, the coarseness and the commonness, seemed dead, and all the tenderness and courage that were in her the only living ruling things that had their dominion over her.

Laura Pearl could never have been transfigured by emotion as this poor child was. She was only a little common girl, with a pretty baby face, that was her only fortune, and an ignorant little mind, that

had slang songs, and obscene jests, and evil knowledge, and vulgar trickeries as its sole store of wisdom; she thought it fun to show her shapely form in posture dancing; she bared her pretty rounded limbs unthinking, to the gaze of the populace; she had never heard a gentle word, or caught the echo of a holy thought throughout her brief hard life, whose laughter was more sorrowful even than its sobs.

Yet for the hour standing there, she was transfigured,—because she had not fear, and she had love.

The conflict probably had not endured ten minutes, but its uproar, its oaths, its ferocity, its insane frenzy of destruction, its noise of splitting wood, and trampled plaster, and falling glass, made it seem like a long-drawn-out battle. The broken benches were already slippery with blood, the ground was already cumbered by the prostrate bodies of some half-score of the mob; the roughs employed every missile they could lay their grasp on, the gentlemen only used their science of attack and of defence; yet those neat, straight, calm blows were very pitiless and took unerring effect. From the moment that the struggle had commenced, Beltran had

striven to reach the ring-leader of the affray,—a huge brawny bully, who, standing erect at the back of the pit, had been the first to shout forth the signal for the wrecking. He appeared to perceive the efforts of 'the swells' to reach him, as he dodged them repeatedly, forced himself behind woodwork, or amongst a thick knot of his companions, and escaped that direct vengeance which he saw hung over him. At length, however, Beltran, with a leap like a stag's, sprang at, and reached him, and caught him by the throat.

Although the big brute was a giant, the gentleman in height outmatched him ; but where Beltran was of slender build, and had lost strength from the manner of the life he led, his foe was of massive form, and sinew ; a mighty brawler, all made of bone and muscle. The conflict looked utterly unequal,—the delicately-fashioned man of pleasure looked to have no possible chance against the bully of the populace, strong as any bullock. As they closed, their faces were in as wide contrast as their forms—the one colourless, calm, intent, with the pale curved lips pressed close ; the other flushed, and swollen, and big-veined, with the great teeth locked like a mastiff's. I shuddered and closed my eyes for a

moment,—only one,—when I looked again the man was down, and Beltran, with his hands still at the rioter's throat, shook him to and fro as though he were a child, and beat his great shock head against the iron pillar beside which he stood.

I saw then what the rage of a man, habitually calm and indifferent to an excess, can be when it at length is roused. All the pent passion in him, to which he had permitted no utterance, poured itself out now in physical violence.

The iron column was the one nearest the stage of all that row of fluted gilded metal shafts which ran the whole semicircle of the house, and gave it half its elegance and lightness. Thus he was very near to me and to the Wood-Elf. The girl gazed on in that wrapt fascination which the ferocity of physical struggles exercises over all women ; and I shared it with her. The writhing of the huge ruffian's body ; the impotent convulsions of his gigantic limbs ; the swelling of the black veins of his throat ; the gasping of his open mouth for words that would not come ; the dull thud as his skull was again, and again, and again dashed against the iron ; the contrast of the furious onslaught which thus dealt with him, and the look upon Beltran's face, which never

lost its pitiless and immovable repose !—these had an awful fascination for both myself and her ; one which held us breathless, wonder-stricken, spell-bound.

‘ You will kill him, my lord,’ gasped Nellie.

Beltran did not seem even to hear her voice.

‘ You will kill him, sir ! ’ she cried out, her pretty chiming voice grown shrill and tremulous with fear ; —not fear for the death of the man of her own class, but fear for the issue of the passions that she for the first time saw roused and loosed.

The cry passed over the head of the one she supplicated, unheard or unregarded. The girl, beside herself with agitation, and nerved by the strong impulsion of an impersonal terror, sprang down the six-foot depth that severed her from the ground-floor, and seized with both her hands the sleeve of Beltran’s coat.

‘ You will kill him—my God ! ’

‘ Why not ? ’ said Beltran, without looking up ; —and he struck the man’s skull yet again against the iron column : driving it home upon the metal as though he drove a nail in with a mallet.

The girl gazed with her great blue eyes dilating.

‘ Is he worth it, sir ? ’ she dared to whisper.

Her instinct led her to say the only thing that could have touched him to attention in this hour.

His old, quiet, contemptuous smile came on his mouth in an instant.

'I doubt if he be,' he said indifferently, rather to the sense of her words than to their speaker; and he flung the man down with a crash upon the floor, where the huge body lay motionless, and the beaten brain throbbed slowly into stupor.

At that instant one of the many gas jets from which the glass globe had been shattered, flaring higher, caught one of the lace curtains of the pit tier boxes. There were a sheet of flame; a scent of burning stuffs; a puff of smoke;—they were enough.

The rioters, dominated only by the one sovereign impulse of self-preservation, ceased from their work of violence and ruin, and rushed pell mell to seek their outward way through the narrow doors and passages.

Beltran saw the danger; it was in a favourite box of his own, where he would lie perdu sometimes after dinner, with only the jewelled arm, and the bouquet, and the lorgnon of his companion of the hour visible through those very draperies of blue silk and white lace, which were now

consuming under flames. As he saw, he caught up a breadth of green baize which had been torn off the pit benches, reached up, grasped the burning curtain, and wrenched it down with no other cost than a scorched wrist. In two more seconds the danger which had threatened the theatre had died wholly away, and only left the odour of charred wood lingering after it, and the naked framework of the box exposed.

But the terror it had inspired endured much longer; the crowd were blind and deaf to the fact of their own safety; the alarm of fire had killed all other memory in them. Like terrified sheep one moment, and raging wolves the next, they huddled together, then fought, and tore, and shrieked, and swore, and trampled one another underfoot in mad competition for pre-eminence in egress.

‘They will do their own killing now!’ said Beltran with that placid contempt which men of his character always feel for the excited agony and maniacal terror of a populace. And he stood with that odd quiet smile on his face, looking on at the plunging, shrieking, struggling mass of his enemies as they fought their way out through the portals of the house which they had ruined.

It was no vengeance of his own seeking; but it was vengeance curiously swift and sure. That wild throng pouring from the doors, the stronger trampling down the weaker, the more ruffianly brutally forcing their passage over the trodden bodies of the feebler in the fight, the whole stream rushing outward, pent-up, broken, mad with fury, like a swollen mountain-stream hemmed in a narrow gorge, drew at last attention in the street without; and constables coming to the rescue were met by that screaming, terrified, maddened, living river.

At length the building was slowly cleared of the last of the mob that had disfigured, and striven to destroy, it. That last was the big bully. As they raised him his eyes opened and glared stupidly, yet with returning consciousness, around him.

They fell upon his conqueror.

He made a sign for Beltran to draw nigh him, and drew his breath tightly.

'It was all along o' *her*,' he gasped. 'Look'ee, ye've hit me hard, but I don't hate yer as I hate that devil, now all's said.'

'She set you on to this to-night?'

'Damn! I ses she did,' gasped the wretch, his voice hoarse and almost inarticulate, 'I warn't

no worse nor most, and I bore yer no grudge, though ye're a swell; but I seed her night after night in yer theayter, and I was mad on her, right on mad. She's the buxomest blowan as ever—'

'Never mind that, go on.'

'Yer minded it, as well as me! I ain't got no breath, I can't go on; not rightly. Yer see, them huzzies that yer swells take up with, they lags yer ready, but it's us as they sets their eyes on; they are'n't never true to you swells, they allus git a lover somewheer out o' their own kind. It's a fact, don't go for to doubt it. You swells keep my lady, and my lady keeps Tom, and Dick, and Jerry unbeknown to ye! Lord, what game I've made of yer with her—'

He stopped, his breath failing him, and the great veins in his throat swelling like cords.

'Go on,' said Beltran simply; but the look in his eyes, under their lowered lids, was darker even than that which had been in them when he had hurled this man down at his feet.

'Go on! ye'd go on, choking like this,' gasped the other. 'She made a lord o' me for an hour or two,—'tis them women's way—I'd yer wine and yer gold, and yer victuals and yer bacey, and you

warn't never no wiser ! Ye never are, none of ye. Ye dainty swells, ye're poor trash to wenches like her, they takes strappin big blokes like me as'll beat 'em as soon as look at 'em. Eh ? what was I telling ye ? My head—he do buzz so. Handsome,—ay, she's a rare 'un to look at, but a bad 'un to beat. She got sick o' me, she kep me on and off like : I was a awful fool. Not such a fool as you, though. Well, days agone she seed me, just a minute like ; and she telled me as how, if I'd wreck yer place to-night, she'd take me back to favour, and not never look at you no more. She sed she'd be in the theayter, and when the smash was done, she'd have me round in her own room ; and we'd get dead drunk together and nobody'd come anigh her never agen but me. And I sed I was game for't, and I'd do it, and I'd get my pals about me like, so that there'd be the damndest row. And there *hev* been—eh ? And now she aren't here, curse her,—and they sed awhile agone close by me as she've a stole away with some other lord, and cheated you, and me, and all on us ! And they'll give me the stone jug, and hard labour, just for this ere spree—damn her, damn her, damn her.'

And with the savage oaths rushing fiercely in a

torrent of blasphemy from his purpled lips, the man once again lost all sight or sense of where he was or what he said. No one had heard the strange confession.

‘Take him away,’ said Beltran quietly, turning to the police, ‘and have him as well cared for as you can, at my cost.’

Then he turned to his own friends : ‘They can do without us now ; and we have had enough of it, I think. Won’t you come and have some supper ?’

The other men assented willingly, they were heated and bruised, two or three of them had contusions ; and all were thirsty and tired.

‘It’s a happy thing they did not know where the wines were,’ said Beltran with a little laugh, as he motioned his friends to precede him through the familiar ways. ‘There was something worth wrecking in them, if they’d only guessed it.’

He lingered behind the rest, and approached the Wood-Elf who stood by, very pale, so that her rouge burned with a hectic fire, and her large blue eyes looked black and humid in her little plaintive face.

He took her hand, with a grave and gracious respect in the action.

‘I thank you, sincerely, Nellie,’ he said gravely, ‘you saved me from a passion that disgraced me.’

It was very gracefully said, this acknowledgement from a man commonly so contemptuous to his kind, and so reticent of all manifestation of feeling; and it took a strange effect on the poor little dancer.

She trembled in all her limbs till her bright silvery wings shook like those of a frightened dove. If a season earlier he had given her a jewelled trifle and a flattery she would have received both with a saucy laugh; the touch and the words, that had as much reverence in them as though they were given to his sister or his wife, moved her curiously to a passionate sense of pain and of unworthiness.

‘It was a rough scene for you, Nellie,’ he continued gently, noting her embarrassment and her emotion, though not witting of their cause. ‘You were a brave little soul to stand by us through it. Come to supper with me, and have some claret-cup to shake off those horrors.’

The girl shrank back.

‘Not now, my lord,’ she murmured; ‘not to-night. I couldn’t, I couldn’t!’

He looked at her quietly, and understood something of what was moving her,—moving a little

ignorant, childish, burlesque dancer whom he paid ten shillings a night—to reject an honour and a pleasure that a week earlier would have raised her to the height of ecstasy and triumph !

He dropped her hand, and did not press her further. But he stooped to her with that graver sweeter accent in his voice which Laura Pearl had never heard.

‘ You are as well away, little one. Go home ; and keep your bright and honest courage untarnished if you can. When you want a friend,—rely on me.’

Then he went on his way to his supper-room.

The customary attendants had fled in terror ; but the supper was set forth as usual on the table, and he bade them welcome to it. He was easy, tranquil, indifferent, in no way altered from his habitual manner ; and but for the disorder of his attire and his inability to use his left arm, there appeared no sort of change in him. I shivered at what seemed such almost inhuman self-possession. It is true, I was famished and unnoticed ; all things look dark to us in such a case.

As they sat down there was a buzz of voices crossing one another in a fiery fury of excited talk ; when it lulled a little, Paget Desmond’s ringing

mellow voice came straight athwart the table in a point blank question :

‘ Vere ! You have never told us,—what’s amiss with Laura ? ’

‘ Nothing is amiss with her.’

The voices fell ; all the eyes of his guests turned wonderingly on Beltran.

‘ Nothing ! ’ echoed the guardsman in amaze. ‘ Nothing ! Then why on earth didn’t she show ? ’

‘ Caprice ! ’ put in Denzil, hastily, divining that there was something wrong with his friend. ‘ Last winter, in Paris, Ysaffich paid a forfeit of twelve hundred francs, and, what was more astonishing, left her great part to be filled up by her most detested rival, for a mere piece of obstinacy and ill-temper, and the determination to spend that particular evening in a dinner with Russians at the Café Madrid, as she had made a wager to spend it.’

‘ But that wasn’t a first night, surely ? ’

‘ It would have made no difference to Ysaffich if it had been. She would have beggared herself of everything she possessed to carry out her caprice, and win her wager.’

‘ The wager was a big stake, then ? ’

‘ The wager was a box of sugared chesnuts from

Siraudin's! Nothing more on either side. Paget, on my word, you don't know women if you can't estimate the overwhelming ecstasy that lies for them in having their own way, even when their own way is their own ruin.'

'Well—is Laura dining anywhere, then, like Ysaffich?' persisted Desmond, who was the biggest and most good-humoured of guardsmen, but slow to comprehend or to follow a hint. 'It's deuced cool and ill-natured of her if she be—making all this row!'

'What on earth will poor Beaufort say? He begged me to telegraph how the piece went,' said Dudley Moore. He spoke of the author of the extravaganza—a clever, graceful jester, who was imprisoned by a sudden attack of illness.

'Beaufort need not despair,' said Beltran, with a certain inflection of coldness and of authority in his voice. 'It is only a question of delay. His interests will not suffer.'

'Pardon me. It is not in your power to promise that. The public—'

'The public! Well! What of the public?'

'Is not a turnspit dog that will come at your bidding to roast every joint you may put to the

fire ; and it certainly won't be inclined to perform its good offices for one of which it has once been balked as a meal.'

'No? And yet how contentedly it lives, famished on the crumbs which the Press scatters to it from the begged crusts of borrowed opinions ! At any rate, Mr Beaufort shall have what justice I can procure for him ; and what compensation money can offer.'

'That is very amiably said,' interrupted the great editor. 'But it seems to me that you utterly ignore the fact that it was the absence of a favourite actress to-night, not any hitch or fault in the presentation of the piece, that caused the émeute yonder. Now it will be exceedingly difficult to please the public with that same piece anyhow. It is as bad as champagne that has been uncorked but not drunk ; whatever vintage it might be from, whatever sparkle it might once possess, it is flat and flavourless now. To produce it at all will be of very doubtful wisdom ; not in your interests, I fancy, certainly not in Beaufort's ; but to produce it without Laura Pearl in it will be sheerly and simply an impossibility.'

'Why so ?'

Beltran asked the question coldly and curtly, and a darkness came into his grey, tranquil eyes.

‘Why so! Can you ask? And you have known the theatrical public all these years!’

‘And so have I,’ dashed in Denzil. ‘And I could see your meaning fast enough if you were talking of an actress of mind, of talent, of taste; but we are only talking of a handsome woman who dresses well, and does breakdowns. There are scores of them to be had at the music-halls.’

Dudley Moore laughed a little, grimly.

‘We are talking of a woman who—be it through beauty or breakdowns—ingratiates herself sufficiently with her audience for them to pull the house down because she don’t appear. This popularity of hers makes her as necessary to the success of this establishment, as though she were a Grisi or a Ristori. I am not paying her a compliment. If the public get accustomed to seeing a performing monkey at a certain house, and like the monkey, and find salt in its antics and tricks, it will make a fearful row if the monkey be absent from any piece performed at that theatre. It considers itself cheated, in point of fact; cheated out of its pet spectacle and diversion.’

‘You are not very gallant to the absent!’ cried Denzil.

‘I am not seeking to be gallant; I am stating a fact. You say she is of no consequence because she is only a burlesque actress; I say she would be of just as much consequence if she were only a monkey. However, I am talking on the premiss that either her caprice of non-appearance (whatever its cause) is to continue, or that our friend here is irritated enough by it to resent it by her future exclusion.’

‘Oh, hang it!’ cried Desmond in dismay. ‘I say;—we can’t do without Laura. She’s no end of fun in those flip-flaps. He won’t cut up rough with her for this—will you, Beltran?’

‘Colonel Desmond, you forget that we are all of us unenlightened as to the cause of the lady’s absence, and consequently so as to the extent of her offences and the duration of her exile,’ said Dudley Moore, with dry cruel unction.

Beltran himself, thus directly appealed to, once more could no longer evade answer.

‘I don’t fancy you will any of you be like’y to see her in this place again,’ he said very calmly; ‘as for the cause,—I don’t think that much matters to

anybody. Ysaffich's sweetmeats only concerned those who had to pay for them.'

There was the strange quiet smile about his mouth as he spoke, with which he had watched the rioters rush on their own destruction; everybody at the table felt that the subject was not one to be pursued with him; even Desmond gathered that it might be best to drop the topic, and even Dudley Moore's bitter tongue remained for once inactive.

Beltran, with his easy languid laugh, changed the theme by a brief and witty story. It was very seldom that he ever took the trouble to amuse people; when he did no one could do it with more effect or greater charm. He chose to do it this evening, and succeeded.

The conversation grew brisk, and gay, and bright with genuine mirth; the wines were admirable, the men's tempers were heated. They drank perhaps a little more than they ought to have done; but the laughter if continuous was always good-natured and always genuine.

I no longer thought Beltran callous and heartless; he seemed to me a very marvel of self-command and of courage.

To be sure, by this time, he had given me food in abundance and a drink of water, which made me regard him through Claude glasses. But, my very dear people, you do just the same : when your master, the world, keeps you starving, you, in your cynical hunger, murmur at its coldness and harshness ; it is a Saturn that devours its children, it is a Nero that fiddles while you are shrieking in agony, it is a Commodus that sees men tear each other to death for his pleasure, it is a Judas that betrays his master, it is an Israel that crucifies all divinity ! But if the world only toss you a cake, only keep you well fed and well fattened, what a good and a fair world it is, how full of all sweetness and light, how true in its vision, how pure in its excellence ; fruitful as Ceres, smiling as young Hebe, tender as the virginal mother of Krishna, many-breasted as the Carthaginian goddess by whom all the multitudes of men might be nurtured !

And you are as sincere in your worship as in your curses, only you are an optimist in both.

When the supper-party broke up it was noisily and joyously ; there had been no gayer or pleasanter night at the Coronet than this which followed on so wild a combat.

Beltran saw his guests out by the private door, and laughed them a careless good-night.

It was only one in the morning when he reached his chambers ; but two and three and four were chimed by the clocks, and he never moved from the chair into which he had cast himself.

Once his lips quivered with rage, though they had laughed so lightly and so listlessly all the past hours through. His heart indeed had not been pierced by the blow dealt him that night ; he had never loved this woman save with the slight, soulless, inconstant passion which a loveliness purely physical evokes. But he was deeply wounded in his pride, and in that form of self-love yet stronger than pride which make a discovered infidelity so bitter to any man, even in a wife or mistress who has lost all charm, and from whom release is ardently desired. It was horrible to the haughty and exclusive gentleman to be thus cheated and betrayed ; to be thus cast to the jests of the town ; to be fooled like any boy in his earliest youth ; to be made the dupe and the laughing-stock of a woman drawn from the dregs of the populace !

When his ignoble rival had panted out his confession of hatred and treachery, Beltran had suffered

one of the keenest indignities that a man of his temperament could have endured.

For the opinion of the world, when he himself chose to provoke it, he cared not one straw ; but the opinion of the world when he knew himself a fit subject for its mockery was a very different thing to endure.

He had been universally successful in his intrigues ; he had been uniformly more the sought than the seeker of women ; he was unsparing in his contemptuous ironies on those who were the fools of their own amours ; he was given to believing, and to imbuing others with his own belief, in his perfect keenness of vision, and infallibility of judgment ; he had as little of vanity and as much of it as a man of fine instinct and cool sense, but spoiled by a society that has too greatly deferred to him, usually possesses. Above all, he was intensely proud.

The blow fell on the most sensitive nerves of his nature, and the curse that he breathed through his teeth upon his traitress could hardly have been deeper or fiercer if a cheated idolatry and a wronged worship had spoken in it. His pride had been pierced to the quick and abased in the dust ; it is a less forgiving and a more terrible enemy than the

most cruelly outraged love, for its wounds are far slower to cure, and its scars far slower to fade.

When five o'clock struck, and the last spark of flame died out from the gray ashes in the grate, he was still there ; cast backwards in the great depths of the chair, and gazing out at the dead embers of the fire, as though in its dreary shadows he saw the ghosts of his own dead years : years whose strength had been spent, and whose resolves had been stifled, and whose purer dreams and whose higher desires had breathed out their faint life for ever, under the murderous embraces, and the poisoned kisses, of harlots.





CHAPTER IX.

LA PIPETTA.

ABOUT ten o'clock in the morning the valet was commonly used to knock at his master's door, and being bidden to enter, would carry in some coffee or some soda and brandy, and such letters as had come by the early post. At that hour I was always accustomed to run in likewise; and, perching myself on Beltran's bed, to eat the coffee-sugar, and watch him whilst he glanced through his correspondence. It was generally a great amusement to me, for being of quick intelligence, I had soon learned to guess from what fair hand each epistle came by its very air and aspect, to say nothing of its monogram, and it was a little comedy to me to see

the weariness, the impatience, the contemptuous amusement, or the curt dismissal, which were what he generally bestowed on these delicate, tempting, and glossy letters, which the writers doubtless had conceived would be so welcome or so terrible to him, according as they wooed him or reproached him. This morning, for once, the servant's rap was not answered by a permission to enter; but Beltran, with the only savage oath I ever heard him use, bade the man begone and the letters also. Even to my whine and moan no heed was paid by him; and I sat outside the inaccessible chamber, tired in patience and wounded in heart.

Neglected by my master, bewildered, saddened, and perplexed by the strange events of the past night, I did a foolish thing. I incautiously wandered down the stairs; and, finding the house-door standing open, I went forth into the street.

It was a sunny, frosty morning, and people were astir; it was bright and busy and tempting. There are, in our race, natural and nomadic instincts that no education or captivity can eradicate; an in-born passion for freedom and enjoyment; this, in man, is damned with texts by your priests,

and, in dogs, is chastised with stripes by your keepers. But, as a rule, being of itself innocent, and desirable, and even noble, it is too strong always for either priests or keepers; and under the damnation or the dog-whip will turn the man criminal and the dog mad. This instinct awaking in me; and I, being a little foolish, guileless thing, deprived by my mode of life of many of my proper qualities of self-preservation and of foresight, and rendered helpless and dependant against my very will, was vaguely moved by it, and, knowing no better, moved to my own destruction.

I wandered down the street, playing with the rusty leaves that blew along the pavement, feeling pleasure in the fresh wind that wantoned among my curls, and thinking of no evil, because meaning none. The leaves were always escaping me, and always running gaily on; and I ran after them, wondering, indeed, how such poor shrivelled, brown, and aged things had heart in them for play when they knew, as they could not fail to know, that their day was done for ever, that they never more could toss in western winds and summer suns, but had no other thing to do than to drift dully on, and die.

For I was young, and did not guess that the

leaves, though so worn and sear and useless, are all unconscious of their fate, and murmur amongst each other of their spring-time and their forest, as though they were tossing still aloft, and had not known decay—even as the old amongst you ‘babble of green fields’ and do not see their grade. I chased the leaves, and the leaves outstripped me; I ran unwittingly through many tortuous turns of streets. Just as, triumphant at the last, I caught my playfellows and found them rotten, useless, frail as tinder, a black shadow fell between me and the light; a black cloth was flung over my head and body; I was seized, crushed into silence, and borne away.

When I saw the light again, I was in the horrible den of Ben Jacobs.

‘He’s got to be a cussed pretty beast,’ said the brute as he surveyed me. ‘I shan’t chance a reward: rewards is plants now with them swells. He’s worth two ponies, and I’ll get two ponies for him.’

* * * *

I have a dim recollection of blows, bruises, foreign tongues, bewilderment, dark dens, sharp whipcord, sickness from a curious motion, and im-

prisonment in some floating dungeon. But what I distinctly recall, as the first picture on my mind after the renewal of the hideous scenes of bloodshed and suffering at Bill Jacobs', are a sky of the deepest and most radiant blue, and a vivid quivering sunlight that seemed alive in its intensity; a crumbled wall all clothed with a green that I knew later as that of the acanthus; a herd of goats, a huge barrel upon wheels, and a small, cream-hued, fox-like face that was peering close against mine.

'Ruzzola—Pepe—I do not understand?'

'Well—I can tell you no more. Pepe is a servant to a Marchesa, whose villa is close by; and he had been sent to fetch you from the English ship; some English friend had bought you as a gift to the Marchesa; and lo!—as Pepe was between the town and the villa we overtook him at a little village. The contadini were playing Ruzzola; and Matteo was giving them wine; and he challenged Pepe, and Pepe set you down and went to play in right fierce earnest. They are all alike—these Italians—give them a spade, or a mattock, and they die perspiring in ten minutes; but show them a ball, or a disc, or something to gamble with, and they will fag themselves at it from siesta to sunset!

So they got to play, these two, and they presently waxed furious at it. That wine is fresh from the vats, and Matteo does not water it for his own drinking ! Old Pepe had staked every coin he had on him before they had played half an hour. The luck was at see-saw, and lured him on ; then it set dead against him, and still he played : he staked his pipe, he staked his buttons, he staked his shoes, and before he had done he had stripped himself nearly bare. Then he went mad—and he staked you.'

'Hush !' said the owner of that face, in the tongue of my own kind. 'Hush ! I will not hurt you, I am Spirka.'

'Spirka,' I echoed : the name conveyed no meaning to me, and I did not know where I was !

'Yes. I am Spirka, the Pomeranian. I live in the little hooded house there up on the wine-cart. That is Matteo, my master, yonder, giving a drink to the goat-herd. Oh, it is no matter, he will fill up the cask from the well. No one will be the wiser ; and the wine is not his, you know. Are you in pain now ?'

I groaned that I was.

'That is bad,' said the sympathetic Spirka.

‘You have been in my house three weeks, and have seemed to know nothing.’

‘I know nothing now. What has happened? Where am I?’

‘You are on the road between Civita Vecchia and Rome. And you are in my wine-cart. You were knocked over by one of the wooden rounds at Ruzzola. That is one of our games, you know. Matteo got playing at it with your Pepe, and Pepe knocked you over; they thought you were killed. So did I——’

The Pomeranian paused, and I shivered; though you make your own selves so often into helpless counters on the green-table of fortune, you have no idea how horrible it is to a dog to feel that he has been a mere stake, thrown for as a thing of no feeling,—of no volition,—of no vitality. A man very often will game himself away till he has no more shame or sentient power than his dice; but a dog never does this, and never loses either his self-respect or his sensitiveness.

‘Staked;—and lost you,’ continued the communicative Spirka. ‘You were the property of his mistress—a present from a foreign land,—a thing of price intrusted to his care. He shrieked, he

raved, he cursed himself and you ; then up he lifted his wooden disc, and let it fly with furious force. It struck you as he meant it should ; and as it stretched you senseless on the grass, he took to his heels and fled, howling like a beast—fled before Matteo's knife could reach him. Every one thought you were dead ; but Matteo thought not. Anyhow he put you up here, beside me, and gave you a chance of your life. And you are alive.'

In my present state the declaration appeared to me premature and unconclusive ; however, as I certainly breathed, heard, and saw, I did not dissent openly from it. I ventured to ask why Matteo had not taken me to this Marchesa, who was to be my fate.

'Pooh !' said Spirka, contemptuously. 'He won you—fairly—at Ruzzola. It was not for him to turn out of his road for a strange woman and a foreign dog. What would she have given him for a little beast with two ribs broken, as yours were ? He would have had the stick for getting at games with Pepe, and you would have been thrown neck and crop down a well. Do not get asking rude questions, or I will give you a shake with my teeth.'

'Would it be rude to ask what is Rome ?' I panted timidly.

‘Rome ? I heard a man say once that it was an eternal archaism, uttered in marble :—whatever that may have meant. It is the place we take our wines to ; that is all I know. We shall soon be there.’

‘Is it in England ?’

‘England ! England is a little bit of mud floating in the middle of a duck-pond ! I have heard Americans say so.’

‘It is not ! It is a noble place ; a great place !’ I panted, patriotism coming on me though I knew not one country from another.

‘Pshaw ! Nothing is either noble or great except Rauthelhautszeim !’ responded Spirka, swelling with scorn and pride.

‘And what is Rauthelhautszeim ?’ I asked, appalled at the mere rolling grandeur of the quadrupedal word.

‘My village !’ responded the Pomeranian with dignified emphasis :—and thereon fell a-barking at a goat who had strayed nearer the cart-wheels than Spirka deemed fitting.

I, with my scarcely-healed ribs, lay still and silent among the straw in the little pent-house over the shafts. The extreme strangeness of the scene, and

the marvellous effulgence of the sunlight, stupefied me.

‘What time in the year is it?’ I asked faintly at length.

‘December,’ the Pomeranian answered in a brief pause of his breathless tirade at the obnoxious goat.

It had been in November that I had been seized by Jacobs. Ignorant as I was of time, or of occurrence, I arrived at the conclusion that I must have been sold by the thieves to some purchaser who had consigned me hither. And this conclusion very naturally explained all the imprisonment, suffering, and bewildering torments that I had endured, and which were all blurred in my memory into one indistinct maze of half-obliterated wretchedness.

Matteo came to his place on the cart; the horse, with its bedizened leathern harness, jogged on; the wheels creaked, the bells jingled; the huge wine cask was drawn slowly along; and I lay motionless, exhausted and frightened, amongst the straw.

And thus we moved on through the great, golden, silent waste, all alive indeed with glorious-coloured insects, and waving various-hued grasses, and

shrill grasshoppers trilling under the leaves, and wise-faced bearded goats straying under broken arches, and gazing down from vine-wreathed ruins ; but yet withal so still,—so strange,—so death-like.

The road was uneven ; the day was hot ; Matteo did not urge his horse ; in point of fact he was asleep almost all the way, trusting doubtless to the vigilance of Spirka.

Slumber, and your dog will guard you ; it is only your human friend who will seize that hour of your eyelids' closing to steal your purse, or press adulterous kisses on your darling's lips, or bid your children mock you for a sluggard.

So we moved slowly on, through that wondrous blinding sunlight, which seemed as though no clouds could ever darken, and no rainfall ever soften it ; moved on through two days, resting innumerable times, and covering but a very few roods in an hour.

The horse paused at a little town, whose name is needless here ; a little cluster of dwellings lying, as your Campagna village often does, among deep cork woods and old chestnut trees ; with quaint gray houses, and ancient walls made lovely by the lichens, and great wells everywhere, into which for ever water-

spouts were emptying themselves, with sweet cool soothing measure.

Spirka barked loudly; Matteo awoke; looked lovingly for a moment at the open door of a tavern, then descended before it. The wine, to whomsoever it belonged, seemed likely to be long upon its journey Romewards.

A handsome, good-tempered, dark-eyed woman bade him welcome joyfully; and after setting him down to a meal at a little round table in the ivy-hung balcony, brought to me and to Spirka a plateful of rice, and of what they call maccaroni.

Before I had a chance to touch a portion of it Spirka swept the whole up with his tongue.

‘What right had you to do that?’ I murmured woefully; ‘some was mine.’

‘Right!’ snapped Spirka; ‘I like your impudence. Why!—I am a Prussian!’

Who does not believe in nationalities?

I wonder if Europe will ever do as the good-natured Roman woman did: she boxed Spirka’s ears (who took it quietly as she was so much bigger than he), and then she served me afresh with some food by myself.

There was a black-browed, handsome, thievish-

looking man sitting in the balcony with a box of musical puppets beside him. He looked at it, and spoke to Matteo.

Soon afterwards he came down from the balcony, and took me out of the wine-cart, and shook and pinched and tormented me in that peculiar manner whereby you men imagine that you test an animal's value, and health, and temper. He was clad in greasy sheepskins, he had a sly cruel gleam in his great black eyes, and he looked sluggish, brutal, and a rogue to boot. I trembled beneath his slightest touch.

'What didst give for him, Matteo?' I heard him ask.

'I won him at Ruzzola,' the wine-carrier replied.

'Art in the mood to sell him?' asked the puppet-player.

'Ay, ay,' assented Matteo. 'I have no wish for him. I'll stake him again at a game of Morra, if thou wilt, against five baiocchi.'

'Done!' cried the other Roman, with all his nation's passion for hazard, and for lottery, set on fire.

So they commenced playing.

I, trembling in the hooded house of Spirka, was powerless whilst my fate swung in the balance. It was one of the greatest moments of mental agony that I have ever known.

They played that wild, strange, ancient game of Morra, which with its antics, its vociferation, its twinkling, dazzling, ceaseless movement of the fingers, souterly bewilders the stranger who watches it. They looked to me like maniacs. But to be sure if dogs ruled in the world they would very often raise the cries of 'Rabies !' against very many human actions and grimaces.

A man wheeling round in the maze of a waltz ; a man frantically tearing over the turf in a running match ; a man laboriously beating the water with two flat wooden blades ; a man solemnly blowing forth fire-smoke from his mouth and nostrils ; a man furiously battling with twenty others for the right to kick a big ball into space :—do not all and any of these look infinitely more like insanity than a poor dog just speeding in a straight line to the river-side on a hot summer's day ?

This frantic and foolish battle came to an end in favour of the puppet-player.

My heart sank within me. The wine-carrier had

a frank, good-humoured, sunny face that inspired me with some trust, but the mere touch and glance of this fantoccini-owner froze my blood.

He saluted me with a blow by way of greeting, on entering into possession of my little captive body.

‘Ho! In a week’s time thou wilt jump about like an eel in a frying-pan!’ he cried to me; and nodding and laughing a good-bye to Matteo, he threw me roughly on the top of his music-box, and hoisting it on his shoulders, departed from the hostelry.

‘What an ass thou hast been, Matteo,’ the woman of the house said, as we moved away. ‘To have lost at a game of Morra a little beast like that, who looks worth his weight in silver!’

Matteo hung his head, looking wild with himself for his greed and his loss. Spirka barked a loud farewell, but I think he was glad to reign once more alone on his throne of the wine cart, where he had so long been supreme.

As for me, I went with a bitter heart, and a trembling brain, forth on fresh travels, seated on the slanting roof of the box in which the puppets of my new master reposed. Ah! how I wished—the

first of a thousand such futile wishes—that since we were made to be delivered over to be the slaves of man, we had been created deaf and dumb, as those wooden *burattini*, and not cursed with nerves, and fibres, and affections, and instincts, that are never of any other use to us save only to make us suffer !

I had indeed cause so to wish ; for the time of my most intense torture was now at hand. I had never suffered like it ere then ; in truth, I doubt if any human being ever knows such suffering, even in the worst agonies of your prisons, your mines, and your mad-houses.

My taskmaster, whose name was Giacone, known amongst the populace as Già, proved the tyrant his look had betokened. He was indeed merciless beyond all description ; and the brutalities and privations he inflicted on me came, of course, with ten-fold more torture to me because of the peace and comfort—and latterly the extravagant luxury—of the life I had chiefly led. With the exception of the time passed in Jacobs' power I had never had anything to prepare me for the misery I endured with this Roman slave-driver.

In the first place, he scarcely fed me, save just

enough to keep my life in me ; in the second he fettered my limbs into a little coat and cap that were to me what the fetters of iron are to your prisoners ; in the third he exercised every ingenuity of torment in the process of what he called my education, *i. e.* the endeavour to make me dance, jump, posture, and go through card tricks to the sound of his organ-music.

And this reminds me to tell you what idiots you are when you beat your dogs as you do ; a puppy is thrashed within an inch of his life to teach him ‘ intelligence ! ’ Intelligence, forsooth !—when you have dazed the poor bewildered brain, and confused all the struggling senses, with physical pain ! In educating a dog for sport, for instance, remember that you are educating him *against* all his natural instincts, though to your own uses : *i. e.* you want him to stand still and point, when nature would tell him to dash forward ; you insist on his not ruffling an inch of either fur or feather in retrieving, when instinct would lead him to eat up the whole bird or beast ; you swear at him for not sneaking step by step at your heel, when every fibre of his body, and every pulse of his limbs, are quivering with longing to be ‘ at them ; ’ you require, in a word, every law of his

being to be either violated, or altered, to serve your purpose and pleasure.

This being the case, you proceed to instruct him in these offences against his own habits by the brutal stripes of that foul instrument of torture, a dog-whip ; and when you have made every muscle throb with pain, and bewildered all his mind with internal suffering and piteous terror, you wonder at his 'stupidity,' and curse him or shoot him because he does not obey your word on the instant. Oh how wise you are and how just !—if there be a spectacle on earth to rejoice the angels it is your treatment of the animals that you say God has given unto you !

It is not for me, a little dog, to touch on such awful mysteries ; but—sometimes—I wonder, if ever He ask you how you have dealt with his gift, what will you answer then ?

If all your slaughtered millions should instead answer for you—if all the countless and unpitied dead, all the goaded maddened beasts from forest and desert who were torn asunder in the holydays of Rome ; and all the innocent, playful, gentle lives of little homebred creatures that have been racked by the knives, and turn by the poisons, and

convulsed by the torments, of your modern Science, should, instead, answer, with one mighty voice, of a woe no longer inarticulate, of an accusation no more disregarded, what then ? Well ! Then, if it be done unto you as you have done, you will seek for mercy and find none in all the width of the universe ; you will writhe, and none shall release you ; you will pray, and none shall hear.

Where was I ?

Ah ! Let me pass quickly over the pain of that cruel time.

I do not wish to dwell on this portion of my life.

Già was at his best but a rough taskmaster, and at times a very brutal one. He taught me many accomplishments, as I have said, such as begging for food, as erect as a sentinel ; marching on my hind legs ; shouldering a piece of stick as a musket ; taking wondrous leaps over a stretched cord ; and finally putting a little cap on my head, and sitting gravely in a chair with a pipe in my mouth. As I was excessively small, the pipe was a very small one also : and as this was a very favourite attitude with my audiences, I gained the name in Italy of Pipetta.

Like most other brilliant amusers of the public

I was weary enough at heart, and though I looked so gay and gilded to the *contadini* in my little scarlet coat, and my little cap with the gold band, as I went through my tricks, I wished over and over again that I were dead, and ached in every bone of my little body from blows and from hunger. I went through my dances and my postures trembling with terror, till in the burning days I was as cold as ice ; and I only costumed and capered from dread of the lash and starvation, as your men of wit coin their brain from the dread of poverty and a prison.

It was a miserable, toilsome, sordid life I led ; one mechanical routine of stereotyped antics ; one ceaseless round of mimicry of that joy of which my heart gave not one echo.

I was the envy of all the children for that little red coat of mine, that little gilded cap, that little pipe I smoked, that little tambourine I played.

Dogs were too wise to envy me, for they knew I was not free ; and I—I envied every dog I saw that roved at large, though with a soiled coat and a hungry body ; every dog that barked from his heap of straw outside his master's loggia ; every dog that drove his herd of goats to and from their

milking; every dog that followed some homely, honest, simple duty, and owned a kindly hand that would caress him now and then, and a wooden house that he could call his own.

To be a goat-herd's dog; to sleep on a fragrant bed of dried wild thyme; to bask in the soft warm dawns, and slumbrous evening shadows; to wake to the memory of a pleasant duty to be done to the chime of tinkling bells; to drink and splash at will in the hillside brooks, and to watch the old wise-looking bearded goats nibbling at the green wild vine shoots. What happiness it seemed to me! How passionately I envied, as I passed, them; all shabby and shaggy though their coats might be!

Some of these dogs, doubtless, were sometimes roughly treated; sometimes hungered, and smarted, and were footsore, and sun-heated. But they were free!—and they had not to go through that dreary desolate pantomime of mimicked gaiety, while their hearts were breaking!

Ah! you pity your hewers of wood and drawers of water, you weep for those who do your rude hand-toil that needs no thought, and live in the open air of moor and meadow blown on by all fresh winds of

heaven: guard your compassion rather for those who must still pipe for you, though you no longer dance; who must wear the festal robes of frivolity though famine gnaw at their entrails, and despair devour their heart.

You laugh! You can see no parallel betwixt a little woe-begone anticking dog, and the men and the women of genius? Well, it may seem foolish: yet believe me they have nearer kindred than you think: that one close terrible kindred of woe, and solitude, and bondage, and the iron cruelty of mimicked mirth.

My life endured thus for a year. I saw and heard much in the many wanderings which we made through all the Papal States; much which remains on the copper-plate of recollection, in sharp and defined outline; since there is no aquafortis that bites in so sharply as misery.

There are many beautiful pictures which arise in my memory, of earth and sky, of colour and form, of night and day;—of the majestic old-world beauty of the women, and of the quaint, poetic, rich-hued life in the vineyards and cornfields, in the hill-side osteria, or the harvest-season's outdoor camp. But other and worthier than I have

painted these again, and again, and again, ever since the world was young. All the universe knows the smell of the Parma violets, and the taste of the waters of Trevi; the wail of the pifferari, and the chaunt of the barefooted monks; the frank sweet light of the Roman smile, and the deep strong stench of the Roman cabbage. Why should I dwell on these?

Though the sun was so cloudless, and the smile so fair, and the sod so thick with flowers, the time was dark and drear to me. A time of desolation.

Now and again some girl, drawing the metal pail up from her fountain, would pity my little, dust-stained, wayworn face, and give me a drink from the clear Virgine water, and a kiss from her arched, ruddy lips.

Now and again some old woman, seated at sunset under the vine-hung gallery of her house, telling her beads in the cool calm decline of day and of age, would lift her voice, and bid my master cease to beat me, as he passed.

Now and again some gentle-eyed priest, with a wistful pain and peace together on his face, would take me up, and murmur a kind word to me, and pause at a stall in the street to buy me a little

fried fish, all golden and shining from the stove.

But these were few.

For the most part people are cruel, cruel if only from lack of thought. And they were cruel to me. The children in especial: children are cruel everywhere. Few indeed of the virtues are in-born; and the virtue of mercy rarely—very rarely—ever runs in the quick, gay, self-moved blood of youth.

The children were cruel always. When they wished me to dance, I had to dance, though I died. When I made, through fright, an error in my tricks, they stoned me, and bawled at me. When I had walked round and round on two feet, till I was sick and giddy with the strain, and fell, they screamed to my owner to beat me for the fault:—that fault of my weakness which injured their pastime.

The children were cruel always:—those brown, handsome, graceful creatures, with the limbs of gods and the eyes of angels. So cruel they were, that at length when I saw children drawing nigh I would shiver, and moan, and seek to hide myself under a stone. In vain! Unerringly they would hunt me out, and riot, and scream, and tear me from one and another, till Già, for the sake of

my value, would rescue me from their clamour and their grip, half dead.

Therefore, that time is very hideous, very hateful, to me. And it seemed to me always, that in this Latin land the very earth, by reason of its drought, and pain, and the innumerable dead it hid, was cruel likewise; and that even the sun, burning through so many weeks and months without one drop of rain, grew hard, and horrible, and rather shed death than begat life, with its unquenched rays.

There used to come upon me an infinite longing for the cool gray mists, the cool brown shadows, the dewy grasses damp at noon, the wild west wind sea-fed in summer, that I had known in that old north-country of my birth.

It is a *thirst*, I think—such as birds caged in cities feel—which devours us with so terrible a desire when we, who drew our first breath in the shady stillness of green northern woods, burn, and stifle, and grow blind in the merciless glare of southern suns.

I suffered far more, also, because of the indulgence and luxury of my late brief enjoyment of a life of fashion. I had known what it was to be an idol of

society, to be sunned in the smiles of coquettes, and to be caressed by the hands of great ladies; my palate had been attuned to dainty living, and my taste to all the gay frivolities and charming follies of the world of pleasure, only—as it seemed—that I might suffer more acutely from the degradation of my fate and the misery of my captivity.

I thought how wicked I had been to scorn all those poor dancing girls, who slaved for the popular amusement on a miserable pittance. I, too, knew now what it was to be the slave of the public, to be in the dress of the mime, to have to dance with aching limbs, and play with an aching heart.

How often I had joined with Fanfrelnuche in her merciless ridicule of these poor jaded, tired, rouged, and spangled coryphées of the burlesque; how often I had scoffed with her at their poverty and their sorrows; at the faded prints and the ragged shawls of their own day-attire, contrasted with the gorgeous dresses in which they flashed and glittered in the gas-light; at the hard bread and strong cheese they nibbled by stealth, while they waited for rehearsal; at the tears that gushed into their eyes, under the coarse oaths and brutal vituperations of their stage tyrant; at the piteous fashion in which they would

trudge forth on foot into the rainy or snowy midnight, they, who went skipping and bounding, and whirling and laughing before the footlights, as though they had not a care in the world, or a need in the universe.

I knew now what it was to go through this mimicry of gaiety, this ostentation of radiant mirth, with grief in the heart and famine in the body. I knew what it was to long to lie down and die, yet be forced to rise and caper, and seem merry, because a ruthless Public cried—‘Dance, dance, dance! Shall ye dare to be weary or sorrowful when *we* have bid ye be joyous, and have bought your joy with our money?’

Alas! If I had been cruel from the levity and the thoughtlessness of young years, my sin was visited very heavily upon me.

And another sin too,—my momentary oblivion of my first beloved home, seemed to me now but justly avenged by the wretchedness of my doom. Puffed up with the sudden fashion and luxury of the eminence to which I had been raised; inflated by the compliments and caresses that I received from noble lips and gentle hands; esteeming myself amongst the great ones of the earth, because I fed

off silver, and ate of costly wonders out of their season, and drove in coronetted carriages, and looked from the windows of noblemen and gentlemen; conceiving myself, in my foolishness, to be far lifted above the good and gentle companions of my infancy; I had, wickedly and shamefully, thought scorn of their simple and hardy life, and had dreaded lest people should ever know that my first year had been spent beneath the roof of that rose-thorn cottage.

Wicked ingratitude, foolish shame!—that now had bitter punishment.

And it was not for the gay rich life in London, but for the innocent forest life in the green pine-wood of the Peak, that I yearned with such an agony of longing as I was dragged through the towns and villages of Italy, footsore, bruised, bleeding, worn-out with fatigue, sore all over from blows, devoured by hunger, driven half-mad by thirst, and never hearing any other voices than those that rained their curses on me, or shrieked to me to dance though I were dying.

A year passed with me thus.

It was a hard life enough for Già himself: all such lives are, however romance may colour them, or

their vicissitudes make them seem adventurous to the eyes of imaginative youth.

To tramp all weathers on foot, with a heavy box of fantoccini strapped to your back ; to sleep where you can, in a hay-loft or a corn-barn ; to walk fifteen miles to a town where, maybe, you do not get as many pence ; to play in the scorching heat, under the balconies where the happy people lounge in their pleasant idleness, which seems to insult you with its insolent prosperity and peace ;—all this was hard enough, even for him.

But then he had many easy hours withal : welcome at some wayside trattoria where trade was dull, and a fritter was tossed, and a stoup of wine poured with eagerness for him ; mirth at some rustic bridal, where the fun was at its height, and he, though a stranger and a wanderer, was frankly bidden to join ; a turn at morra ; a stroke at pallone ; a cast of the boccette ; a game at dominoes when the day was done, and the men and the maidens were jesting and dancing in some little village under the cork-trees. He had all these things ; for he was a man of ready tongue, and comely enough in person. But I had none of these—I starved whilst he ate his stew ; I ached with bruises whilst he laughed

in the inn-porch; I was the sport and the prisoner of the brutal children whilst he was flinging his heels in the measures of the dances. I was infinitely miserable; and it seemed to me that my misery would have no end.

In the Eternal City, as in the Campagna, I was but a little, lonely, friendless, miserable, suffering thing. To me, therefore, it was horrible.

A victory looks but a sorry thing to the boy conscript lying cramped, and bleeding, and crushed, and woe-begone in the ambulance waggon on the red evening-tide after the battle. Rome looked but a motley, blinding, cruel, uncanny, eldritch place, full of noise and colour to me, as I lay, aching and terrified and heart-broken, on the top of the wooden fantoccini-box.

I have heard you speak often since then of its sorcery, of its sadness, of its wonderful hues, and its unutterable beauty, and all its mystical, awful charm that none who have once been under its spell can resist; well—I never felt any of these. To me it was only a place where I suffered.

Believe me, it is the light or the darkness of our own fate that either gives 'greenness to the grass and glory to the flower,' or leaves both sickly, wan, and

colourless. A little breadth of sunny lawn ; the spreading shadow of a single beech ; the gentle click of a little garden-gate, the scent of some simple summer roses—how fair these are in your memory because of a voice which then was on your ear, because of eyes that then gazed in your own. And the grandeur of Nile, and the lustre of the after-glow, and the solemn desolation of Carnac, and the wondrous beauty of the flushed sea of tossing reeds, are all cold, and dead, and valueless, because in those eyes no love now lies for you ; because that voice, for you, is now for ever silent.

The narrow, crowded streets : the bray of mules and asses ; the eternal wail of the beggars ; the stench of stews and fries from the cooking-stalls in the alleys ; the overpowering odour from the great mounds of fruit and flowers ; the squalor and the glitter, the filth and the beauty ; the glimpse through the butchers' doors of a dying kid, or lamb, as it struggled beneath the knife ; the shriek of a goose, or a fowl, as it was seized from the living flock to have its neck wrung at the market stall :—these were what I saw of Rome ; what I always see now when I think of it.

Moreover, I was harder tasked in the City even

than in the Campagna. In the latter there had been but a scant audience at best ; two or three performances had always sufficed to gain what coins were to be had in the district. But in Rome there was an audience the whole day long, save at the brief noon-hours ; and all through the starlit evenings, till late into the night.

When one crowd had dispersed, another gathered. No sooner was the round of tricks finished than it had to be commenced afresh. There was scarce a moment that I was not either dancing, or telling fortunes on the cards, or walking round with my toy tambourine to collect baiocchi. Già had no mercy, and the people had no mercy either. It was one perpetual toil, one everlasting misery. At last it so wore me out that I went through the whole programme mechanically, with a noise like the rushing of winds in my ears, and the darkness of a sickly swoon before my eyes. More than once I dropped from sheer exhaustion ; and then was roused with a kick and curse.

I think if you knew what you did, even the most thoughtless amongst you would not sanction with your praise, and encourage with your coin, the brutality that trains dancing-dogs.

Have human mimes if you will ; it is natural to humanity to caper and grimace and act a part : but for pity's sake do not countenance the torture with which Avarice mercilessly trains us ' dumb beasts ' for the trade of tricks.

All through those long, sickly, burning days, with their scorching sun streaming on the parched ground, the lash of my task-master kept me at my tread-mill of mimicry. It was as bitter, unbearable, agonizing toil to me as any that your galley-slaves suffer is to them. The strain on the muscles and limbs was an intense physical torment ; and the incessant nervous apprehension, the terror of ill-usage and blows, were yet more excruciating still.

' The Clown dog draws throngs to laugh and applaud,' says some advertisement :—yes,—and I knew a very clever clown dog once. His feet were blistered with the hot irons on which he had been taught to dance : his teeth had been drawn lest he should use his natural weapons against his cowardly tyrants ; his skin beneath his short white hair was black with bruises ; though originally of magnificent courage, his spirit had been so broken by torture that he trembled if a leaf blew against him ; and his eyes—well, if the crowds that applauded

him had once looked at those patient, wistful, quiet eyes, with their unutterable despair, those crowds would have laughed no more, unless they had indeed been devils.

Who has delivered us unto you to be thus tortured and martyred? Who?—Oh, that awful eternal mystery that ye yourselves cannot explain!





CHAPTER X.

THE DOG AND THE DEVIL.

AFTER a space Già quitted the city. What he did I know not; but it is certain that he displeased the priestly authorities in some manner, and had to go stealthily and swiftly out of Rome. For I heard many dark ominous words pass between him and his mates, the *pifferari*, and the *pifferari* counselled flight; and he departed thence, all hurriedly, by night, taking me and the box of fantoccini with him. From the muttered fragments of talk that I heard, I have a fearful fancy that he had killed some hapless woman in a drunken brawl, and that the woman being a priest's light-of-love, existence on

the Seven Hills was no longer safe or even possible for him.

You will always find that these sluggards who are too lazy to labour for themselves, and seek their support by means of some poor performing animal, are great brutes as well as great cowards. Were you wise, you would forbid all such performances: for, if the man who works neither brain nor body be deemed by you useless and of evil example to the community, what then must he be who, in order that he may live in a sot's idleness and indulgence, does daily beat, fatigue, and torture a creature delivered into his power?

Hiding and skulking, and by means, I think, of false papers and names, Già got across to Ostia; and thence went by sea to Marseilles. The horrors of this passage I cannot dwell upon. I was starved, sick, beaten for moaning, and drenched in a deluge of rain that swept the whole Mediterranean with almost the force of a water-spout. Had it not been for the goodness of an old weather-beaten sailor, who wrapped me in a morsel of tarpaulin, and tied me with a rope to the seat, I must have been driven overboard, or have perished of wet and cold, whilst Già below drank brandy and played dominoes

with the half-drunk skipper of the rotten, groaning, olive-laden felucca.

There is this that is consolatory in life: its darkest hours rarely have *no* ray of light; its woes, its tyrannies, its agonies, commonly give birth to some act of kindness, or of courage, or of compassion, that arises in their midst as a palm in the desert; it is little enough oftentimes, but it is something; something that just saves the earth from being hell.

Marseilles lay white and blinding, and scorched with a hard burning sand-laden wind from the African shores, when we at length reached it after a hideous voyage of storm and heat, of hurricane and drouth united; a voyage through which the skill of the old sailor I have named alone brought the vessel, whilst its captain lay drunk in the cabin, and the crew shrieked and roared to the saints.

In Marseilles we tarried some time; and thence passed across France to Paris.

It was the same old miserable life; the same tramping, and playing, and performing.

‘Oh, what a happy little thing art thou!’ said one day to me an honest, but rather stupid dog (the only dog ever unwise enough to envy me), who lived

in a hut amidst the fields of the great south-west, with a goatherd. 'Look at me—I fare so hardly, I am out in all weathers, I never taste anything except a bit of black bread or rancid meat, I am all the year round with those silly goats, I never see anything all day long but a plover or a henharrier flitting by over the marshes. How lucky thou!—to ride on the top of that box, and to be tossed sweet cakes and biscuits, and to have nothing at all to do but only to dance for thy living!'

Alas, he little knew the perpetual travail of my existence, and how gladly I would have changed places with him, and taken his black bread and his liberty together!

There is no labour so utterly weary and cruel under the sun as the labour which takes the semblance of pastime. For the dullard is free to go to his solitude, and weep his heart out, if he will, for the dead whom he laments: but Verdi must write his new opera though the mistress of his youth lies scarce cold in her coffin.

Our passage across France occupied long; going so slowly as we did, pausing at every little hamlet or wayside wineshop on the road. The people on the whole were more cruel than those of the Cam-

pagna ; the women were toil-hardened and sun-dried, and had not that frank sweet smile of Rome. There were often fairs, or fêtes, on Saint-days, in the townships through which we went.

These were very quaint and picturesque, I admit ; all the colour and the movement ; all the gorgeous charlatans and conjurors ; all the saints and images and banners ; all the white-robed choristers with their censers ; all the flower-crowned girls with their crosses ; all the chanting priests and singing women ; all the green branches, and floating ribbons, and ringing music, chimed in so well with the old grey walls, and the high-peaked roofs, and the straight poplar trees, and the quiet narrow streets.

But on such popular days as these I was so maddened with the noise and tumult, I was so worn out with over exertion and pitiless demands on my frail strength, that at length, whenever we drew near the gates of a town, and I saw the gleam of the golden host uplifted, or heard the clamorous charivari of the fifes and drums, I trembled and sickened, and strove vainly to escape in any ditch or any hole, and was only dragged within the gates by sheer force, by curses and cuffs, and kicks and blows.

Of course I had no power against my tyrant. I

was a little weakly timid thing, and all the natural agility and spirit I possessed were cramped by the garb in which he had imprisoned me, and cowed by the hunger to which he subjected me.

So my life passed : and I had been one year and a half with Già, when at last we drew near to Paris. I dreaded the city beyond all words to tell. I thought that there I should always see the host uplifted, and always hear the shrill din of the charivari.

In the country sometimes I had a respite, a breathing space ; some woman milking her cattle gave me a drink from the foaming pail ; some lad lying deep amongst the hay made me a nest beside him ; some gentle cow would let me rest amongst the fodder of her stall ; some big rough-coated dog about a farm would bring me food and call me to his kennel ; some young girl, leaning out of her lattice in some hostelry we stopped at, would call to Già not to beat me, and would come down and caress me, and beg me of him for the night, and take me to her little bed under the eaves, and lull me to slumber like an infant against the warmth of her soft bare breast.

But in the cities there were no pause, no pity, no

peace, from morn till midnight. The very animals themselves in agony grew selfish, and had but little mercy for their kind, because, for their own dumb helpless lives, men had none.

As we drew near Paris we came to a long steep stony street, uncleanly, unsavoury, full of noise ; I heard them say that it was Sèvres. I have ever since shuddered at the name when I have heard it spoken before these pretty porcelain things it christens.

Here there was a crowd ; the porcelain makers and painters had finished their work for the day ; they were lounging and gossiping and singing, and sipping their coffee inside their house-doors.

Già, as usual, wherever he could command an audience, set his box upright on its pole, opened its case, and began to play, bidding me dance to the music. The puppets never tired, of course ; and I suppose he thought that I was like them.

Now as it chanced I had performed all day long in the town of Versailles, hard by. I had scarcely had any rest ; and I did not know how to commence afresh. Dancing and performing are as severe a trial to us as the hardest rowing or wrestling is to you ; more so, indeed, because you, after all, are only doing

that which you choose to do, and which is in a manner natural to you, whilst all these actions which you teach us are to us painful, unnatural, and full of an arduous strain and contortion, for which our nerves and muscles are utterly unfitted.

The puppets danced gaily, as the organ handle turned; I moved to and fro, as I had been taught, on my hind legs; I smoked my little pipe; I struck my tiny tambourine that was hung round my neck; I did all to the best that I could, and the youths, and the young girls, and the children, and the sturdy tanners of Billancourt and the wan pottery painters of Sèvres applauded gleefully and shrieked, 'Encore la Pipetta!—encore, encore!' so that I had to go again and again through all my antics, and yet they were not satisfied.

Now, I had been performing all day long since sunrise; I had eaten nothing but the handful of boiled rice he had tossed to me. I was very sick, and tired, and worn out; and it so came to pass that, when in obedience to the 'encore, encore' of the impatient and delighted little crowd, Già shouted to me the word of command to commence afresh, I tried to dance again, but,—my strength

failing—tottered, and moaned, and fell, breaking in twain my little painted tambourine.

I lay, stupefied and sick, in the white dust. Già furious, threw himself on me, and seized me by the neck, and beat me ;—ah ! I can feel the rain of the blows now.

‘ I will teach thee to tire ! I will teach thee to fall ! ’ he screamed aloud, and with every word the biting lash curled round my little quivering body.

‘ Beast ! would you kill the dog ? ’ cried one of the porcelain makers, though he did not stir to succour me.

‘ It is mine ! ’ cried Già, a coward though a brute. ‘ It is mine, I will kill it surely ;—the little sluggish devil ! ’

Scarcely were the words uttered, when suddenly a ponderous body flung itself on my tormentor ; a row of white and glistening teeth seized and shook him with tremendous force ; he dropped me with a shriek of terror ; and my deliverer, in whom I recognized one of the princes of my own kind, caught me up in those massive fangs which had wrought my freedom, and bounded off with me in a stretching gallop.

The pressure of his jaws; the speed of his going; the heat; the bruises; the terror; all combined, made me insensible: this manner of deliverance was well-nigh as fearful as the torture itself had been: and I knew not where I was carried nor how long I remained unconscious.

When I recovered my senses, I was lying on long grass beneath the trees of a garden: and over me stood my friend,—a gigantic tawny-coloured Muscovite dog. Huge though he was, and with the grip and the claws of a lion, his eyes were soft and even tender, and gleamed very gently and benevolently on me from under the leonine waves of his shaggy mane.

He addressed me in that universal tongue of ours which is one of the many superiorities which we enjoy over men:—you, poor humanities, born on different banks of a river, or opposite sides of a plain, jabber jargons mutually unintelligible to each other, and on a public mart, or at a *tir national*, stand bewildered amidst a score of unknown tongues spoken by your next-door neighbour. But place a Labrador dog with a Pyrenean dog, let one of Poland meet one of Peru, and lo! you behold them intelligible to one another at once, able to exchange

converse by a freemasonry to which the widest-spread of your brotherhood is as naught. For our race being too wise ever to build either a Babel or a Babylon, no curse of confusion rests on us ; and though scattered all over the world, we are yet even as one great nation.

‘I am Russ,’ said my deliverer. We always give our names frankly to each other ; that base human device, an alias, is wholly unknown amongst us. ‘I am Russ. I will not hurt you ; you know that. We are far away from that brute, your taskmaster. No man can emulate my speed. I have raced even with rein-deer ; and have beaten them. You poor little frightened thing !—he would have killed you if I had not interfered. Are you a dancing-dog?’

I groaned an assent : I was ashamed of my profession, and of my little red jacket, and of the broken tambourine about my neck.

‘Ah, that is so like a man !’ said the giant Russ, grimly. ‘To case your little supple body in a tight bit of cloth, and to force you to strut awkwardly about on two legs, and to then call that sort of disfigurement “training” you ! Well—I am glad that I saw you. I fly at all such creatures as Già. Wretched, lazy, lubberly ruffians, who are too idle to

labour for their living, and torture a bear, or an ape, or a goat, or a puppy like you, to get the coins that they want for their food and their drink! I have had a tussle ere now with this Già. Too idle a sot to work for himself, he is for ever pressing some innocent thing into his service, that he beats, and starves, and drives mad for his profit.'

I shuddered with the remembrance of my sufferings as he spoke; and with the pain of the bruises that covered every inch of my body.

'You are very good,' I faltered. 'But how can you keep me from him?'

'Why, see here. I will get you permission to stay in this place. You need not go out of the garden walls; and Già will never dare to track *me*. Ask every one in Paris who Russ is and what he can do. If you feel well enough now, come within.'

He stalked like a lion towards a low white stone building; and I feebly followed him, still wondering, dazed, and affrighted. My limbs ached, and my coat impeded my movements; but I managed to crawl after him meekly and feebly, through some winding grassy paths, all yellow with golden dandelions and shadowed with hanging boughs. At

last we approached the low stone house; with a thatched roof on which pigeons sat pluming themselves, an old carved oak porch half smothered in that white creeper you call traveller's joy, and some deep stone-embayed windows hidden likewise in ivy and creeping roses. Amongst all this verdure and blossom, there hung, half seen, a wooden board on which glistened a couchant silver stag.

Russ crossed the threshold and mounted some broad wooden stairs, so black with age and slippery with polish that I had much ado to climb them after him. On the head of the staircase he pushed open an unlatched door, thrust himself through it, and advanced into the chamber.

It was broad and low; with casements looking out on sunny meadows; it was filled with what to me seemed lumber, quaint shapes and devices; shabby draperies; and strange wooden skeletons that filled me with terror. At what I afterwards knew was an easel, stood a young man painting; at a little distance sat a girl in a blue serge gown, and with a white peaked cap.

It was to the woman that Russ advanced; taking me in his mouth, and laying me at her feet: then

retreating a little, he gazed at her with eyes of wistful entreaty, thumping his bushy tail weightily on the floor.

The young painter laughed.

‘Another protégé, Russ? Verily thou art the most benevolent of all four-footed Christians!’

It was a misnomer. We have ever been pantheists: pagans if you will. Had the dogs of Jerusalem been Christians, be sure that Pilate would have been torn limb from limb, and Peter with the lie upon his lips been bayed from out the hall of judgment. Where one dog lives and loves, there at least is one friend faithful.

However, the speaker meant well, I doubt not; and Russ, understanding him, leapt on him in gratitude, knowing that he had obtained asylum for my helplessness.

‘Poor little thing! How thin it is, and how frightened!’ said the young woman, who stooped over me and touched me gently. ‘This is the fifth dancing-dog that Russ has brought to me!’

Russ thumped his tail in confirmation.

‘The fifth! Where are they then?’ the artist asked.

‘Oh, I have placed them out; people around

took them. They are happy,' the girl answered him, smiling and freeing me from my coat. 'Ah! forgive me, Monsieur Carlos, I forgot that I was sitting; I have disarranged the pose!'

The painter looked down on her tenderly.

'No matter! The sun is low. We will put the canvas aside till to-morrow. Then I will paint you with the sick dog in your lap; that soft pity becomes you so well!'

She smiled again, and a bright warmth came over the cool clear olive of her cheek; then she rose and bore me from the chamber, followed by Russ. In a few moments I was lying on some hay in a corner of a fragrant-smelling loft, and being fed with fresh milk and bread, whilst Russ surveyed the operation with a good-natured and self-approving air.

'That woman is an angel,' he said to me as she passed out, leaving me cleansed, comforted, and refreshed.

'Who is she?' I asked feebly.

'Our Madelon,' he returned, as though all were uttered therein. 'I have lived with her ever since she was fifteen. She is twenty-two now. Philip Ferrand left me here when I was young. He never paid them, either, for his six months' board and

lodging. I have heard painters say since then that he has risen to great eminence in England. Well—if he have, he has never thought of either his dog or his debts. The old Mère Bris, too, here nursed him through a dangerous illness; and not so much as a kerchief for her throat has Philip ever sent her in payment.'

'But they have been good to you?'

'Good! Indeed they have. I was never happy with him. He would swear at me, and, what was worse, sneer at me. You know a dog would sooner be kicked than be laughed at. Here I have been happy all my days. It is such a still, quiet, pleasant place; and one does as one likes. Sometimes I go out for a long ramble; when I do I am sure to meet some animal in distress; and I rescue him, if I can, and bring him to Madelon.'

'That is very noble of you.'

'O dear, no! It is just commonly right. Life would get too smooth and too sleepy here, if I did not go out sometimes, and have a fight and a tussle over some bit of evil doing. For what else was I made so big and so strong? Do you know what they say in my country?'

'No. In Russia?'

‘In Russia. They don’t let dogs enter churches, because they say that a dog once betrayed Noah to the devil, for the sake of getting that thick, warm coat which we northern dogs now all wear. Now, that is a lie. It just shows the way men distort things. Amongst our traditions, which of course men can know nothing about, is one on that very point; and it runs thus, having nothing to do with Noah.

‘In the very early age of the world there was a dog, very wise and brave, and who hated a lie most of all the sins under the sun.

‘Now, this dog one day came to a church, where a preacher was being listened to as though he were an angel from heaven. The dog knew better, and sprang on him, and tore off his robes, and showed a cloven hoof and a tail beneath them. “Foolish people!” cried the dog, “your priest is the devil of Falsehood;”—and he drove the devil out of the sanctuary.

‘He went to a second church, and found the priest the devil of Greed, and drove him out the same.

‘He went to a third, and there exposed the devil of Lust; and to a fourth, and there unmasked the

devil of Self-love; and to a fifth, and there sprang upon the devil of Empty-words, and the people all stood aloof and wondering, and cried, "Eh, then! are our priests all devils?"

'But the devils themselves were sorely frightened, and said, "If the dog tear off all lies, then the trade of devils and priests will be gone!" So they banded themselves together, and persuaded the foolish people that the dog was a wizard, and must be killed for the weal of the world. And in the end, the wicked people stoned the dog to death; and he died because he had dared to witness the truth, and had not left those fools alone to their worship of falsehoods.

'And from that day, devils still having great influence, and above all being strong in all pulpits, whence they throw dust in the eyes of the multitude, they have always hated all dogs, and have forbid them out of their churches.* This is the true tradition. The other fable is a devil's device.'

I thanked him for his instruction, but being still faint and weary, longed in my soul to be quiet and sleep. Besides, when you have just been in the

* Except in Scotland; where I suppose that the people's gratitude to their Colley-dogs is too strong for Satan to vanquish it.—ED.

grip of a cruel man, it seems to you that the devils themselves can hardly be very much worse to deal with; and you hardly feel that proper abhorrence of them, which you would do at any other time.

Returning to present matters, I asked him who was that youth whom I had seen in the painting-chamber.

‘Oh, an artist!’ answered Russ, with a little good-natured contempt. ‘All the men who come to this place are artists. That one has been here since the first days of March. By name he is Carlos Merle. He is of very great genius certainly; but I am not sure of him for all that. He is fitful. He works with great spurts, and then does nothing for days, except lie on the grass and dream, or murmur to Madelon. Genius is a great thing, of course; but it is not everything. Genius is like a spirit flame; but genius must have its armour of application, as the flame must have its lamp-shade, or both will go out under a blast of rough wind.’

‘What was he doing when I saw them?’

‘Painting her portrait. All of them like to do that. It occupied Jean Stenlinck six weeks last

year to get the portraits of a brown pipkin and a market-cabbage; and Jean still is mad with himself because the pipkin won't look old enough, and the cabbage will look too green on his canvas, do what he will to alter them. Ah! the ecstasies I have heard him go into over a well-painted wooden pail, or a pinch of snuff, in a paper! They see nought to adore in real pails, and papers of snuff: then how can the mere imitation of the thing have any worth?'

I was too tired and ill to take any interest in his disquisition. Since that time I have heard plenty of art-jargon talked by half the connoisseurs of Europe: but I am not sure that I ever heard anything more direct to the point, or more truly sensible, than this objection from Russ. But Russ is not the world:—and meantime Meissonniers fetch the same prices as Raphaels.

'I like artists,' continued my instructor, laying his massive form down to rest. 'They are stupid, you know. They will stare for hours at a ripple of water, or a few twisted twigs, and they always talk as if heaven and earth depended on their hog's bristles and their oil-tubes. But they are a kindly, simple, genial race, as a rule. They are so ignor-

ant, and know nothing about a bird except the hue of its feathers, and nothing about a dog except the tint of his coat, and nothing about a woman except the red in her lips and the white in her limbs, going altogether by the surface of things, and fancying they have got "atmosphere" in dabs of grey and yellow, and "distance" in streaks of flake white, and "sunset" in scumbled lakes and ochres. Yet they are very happy in that innocent, blissful stupidity of theirs; and, like all happy people, are good-natured. Of course no dog was ever so ridiculous as to draw an imitation dog, and take pleasure in the canvas creature that could not bark, or move, or smell, or feel. But then so many of men's pursuits do look so trivial to us that I scarcely think Art, as they call it, is much worse than anything else. And it hurts nothing, which is more than can be said of the generality of their pastimes.'

'You do not think well of men?'

'Oh yes, well enough,' said Russ carelessly, as a giant will speak of pigmies. 'There are only two animals in all creation that I hate, and they are a cat and a woman.'

'You think these two alike, then?'

‘Alike! My dear little soul, they are one and the same! When cats die they become women. Did you never know that? Look at their pretty little teeth, their velvet skins, their agile grace, their idolatry of warmth, and ease, and good living; their chilly sensualism; their frolics, that always end in a scratch to their playmate; their passion for chasing a mouse, or a lover, that once caught and slain, is valueless vermin for evermore in their sight:—the cats keep all their characteristics when they turn into women. We become men, it is said, though I doubt it myself; for it would be hard to descend in the scale of creation. But, dogs, who believe this, affirm that our singular antagonism to cats is instinctive, as against our future betrayers in our future state of existence. The dog that kills a cat will, it is said by our poodle-pundits, meet that cat as a woman when he is a man, and will marry her. There seems no justice in so terrible a punishment: but, if true, it serves to explain the “cat and dog life” of most marriages.’

And with that Russ, fatigued by his long gallop through the heat of the noon, composed himself to sleep; and slept with fits and starts, and mutterings and growls, caused, he afterwards told me, by

a dream which he had of a tortoiseshell cat, whom he had once slain in the days of his youth, incited thereto by his master, and who appeared to him in his slumber, with prophecies of her vengeance.

I, overpowered with pain, joy, fear, and fatigue, all commingled, slept also; and forgot in slumber all my bruises, my woes, and my exile.

Ah, when I awoke how delightful it was! No coat imprisoning my limbs, no stick shaken in my eyes, no kick thrust into my ribs, no curse hurled at my defenceless weakness! It was all calm, and still, and sweet: the bright summer sunlight came streaming in; the apple boughs, fruit-laden, swayed against the windows, the cocks crew near at hand, the sheep bleated afar, the pleasant scents of fruits and of blossoms and of herbs blew in upon the south-west wind;—and I rejoiced in all this freedom, peace, and loveliness, with that gratitude which is a dog's religion.

Why have you not more of it in yours?

The Romans, I have heard tell, veiled their faces in prayer: that was fear. The Greeks stood, with eyes fastened on the earth: that was meditation. The Christians kneel: that is entreaty. There were but the poor Peruvians, who bowed

low, lifting their eyes to heaven, and showering kisses in the air: that was rejoicing, thankfulness, and adoration, all in one.

And you think you are holier than they were?

Well, think so if you like.





CHAPTER XI.

THE SILVER STAG.

IT was a tranquil, fragrant place, this little hostelry of the Silver Stag. It was quite old, and very rustic, though yet so near to Paris.

Its gardens were famous for their peaches, and its hives for their honey. It was a drowsy, shady, odorous place; full of the murmurs of birds, and of bees, and of ever-tremulous leaves. Untrained roses bloomed in every nook and corner, and pigeons and doves, by the hundred, flew all day in and out of a great square stone dove-cot that had been built in the years of the Dame de Beauté. For human life about it there were only the cheery old woman, Ma-

non Bris, her daughter, Madelon, and the painter, Carlos Merle.

Their house was much frequented by artists, who came thither for sake of economy, fresh air, solitude, and the beauty of the woods; men could live there for a few francs a week, enjoy all the stillness of the country, watch all the charm of woodland life, and yet withal be in Paris in less than an hour. The place was indeed consecrated to artists, and few others ever intruded there; unless it were some gay group of students and grisettes on a Sunday, after a childish frolic in the wood, and some wild rounds of games and dances under the orchard trees. All the week it was very still, still as death, except for the fluttering of the doves, and the singing of the birds, and the turning of the water-wheel, and now and then the bay of Russ.

For old Manon Bris being well off, and her daughter well dowered, and being, moreover, an honest, fearless, pure-living old woman, cared not if she displeased her patrons; and set her face straight against all those Greek-limbed models and Egyptian-eyed companions whom the painters would fain have brought thither; and she would have none of them—no, not if it were ever so—and

made her will felt on her guests, who laughed, indeed, but yet obeyed, and came there only with male comrades.

It is needless to say what a paradise this place was to me, a poor little, terrified, agonized, hunted creature, who for a year and a half had only known blows, and kicks, and hunger, and thirst, and suffering. They let me dream or doze all my hours away; play at will in the sweet unshaven grasses; roll the fallen apples about as balls, and roam from dawn to twilight in the deep old leafy ways of the fragrant-scented garden.

It seemed to me happiness exquisite enough only to stretch my limbs in peace on the cool moss; only to pass the whole blithe day without one voice raised in anger at me; only just to be fed, and to be clean, and to be left quite free. The passion for freedom is intense in dogs. Men do not much mind the gall of fetters, if so be that those fetters are well gilded. But the gilt on a chain makes it none the better to us; and we pine, and fret, and thirst for liberty, with a force you can never know—you, who so continually sell yourselves into bondage for the sake of the purchase-price.

Moreover there was one person very good to me ; ever gentle, ever thoughtful, ever kind. This was Madelon Bris.

She had not very much beauty, this Madelon ; not at least after the vivid colouring and the exuberant outline of Avice Dare, who had the scarlet bloom on her cheeks and the northern gold in her hair. She was very slender, and very pale, with great dark changing eyes, and swift small feet, and a mouth which, though somewhat large, yet had a smile so sweet that it had loveliness.

In every iota she was so unlike to what Avice had been in the old Peak days, that the contrast was almost startling to me. She was so skilled at every sort of work ; so rapid and lithe in every kind of movement ; she seemed so perpetually content ; she sang so constantly over her labour, indoor or out.

She knew every fowl by name ; she would twist the humblest grasses and flowers into such pretty forms ; she did all household things with so neat yet so elegant a touch ; she dressed so simply, yet with so much grace and suitability for the work she did ; with never any ornament save only one plain and massive cross of gold hung on a string

of ivory beads. Everything about her was in harmony, and her life 'seemed set to music,' though it was a life of continual industry and of even prosaic cares.

Her mother was very old, and did little save sit in the sun and read her well-worn book of hours. All the toil and the thought of the place fell upon Madelon; and there were no boards so white, no brazen pans so shining, no pottery so clean, no honey so clear, no poultry so plump, no plants so healthful, no omelettes so lightly tossed, no beds so sweetly lavender-scented, as those of the Silver Stag.

This life of hers was prose, even as had been Avice's; but there was a poetry in it.

It was not heavy-weighted with tawdry follies; it was not fevered with discontent; it was not disfigured by an everlasting straining after something unpossessed; it was not hideous with that dead incurable poverty of spirit, and abject slavery to the dominion of ignorance, that are so appallingly hopeless in the lives of your English poor.

Avice had wreathed huge glass beads on her throat, red and yellow and blue; Madelon never wore but the ivory necklace that had been her

great,-great-grandmother's. Avice had worn a gown of many colours and of as many rags; Madelon wore one of dark blue serge, but whole and deftly shaped. Avice gathering radishes for the dinner-table had thrown them all together, wet and soiled with the clods of their native earth; Madelon washed them heedfully, set them in little dainty pyramids of red and white, and garnished the whole with blossoming thyme. Avice at her work had kept her mouth sullenly tight set; Madelon at her work sung like some blithe bird. In Avice poverty had been dire ugliness and sulky wrath; in Madelon poverty was smiling patience and thoughtful content.

But there is no need to amplify examples; the one was Gallic and the other British.

Life went very softly and happily at the Silver Stag: old Manon Bris was a cheery old soul, with a stock of quaint legendary lore from her native province and a mirthful temper combined with a sturdy will. There was no one at the house that summer save Carlos Merle, and he lived almost like their son and brother. He was a man of seven or eight and twenty, bohemian, enthusiast, and artist; he had few friends and little gold; but in com-

pensation he had a most singular personal beauty and as singular a genius for art.

I have never in my life seen a man more beautiful than Carlos ; he was like some perfect classic statue, and was radiantly fair with golden locks, though the country of his birth was far away south, touching the Pyrenees. They did not know very much about him ; but from what he had said it had transpired that his mother had been a woman of noble family, who had contracted a low marriage with an opera-singer. Both were dead now, leaving him their beauty, their artistic dreams, and their poverty.

It was easy to see that there was more than friendship betwixt Madelon and her guest. She was reserved with him ; and as shy as the natural dignity about her, and her clear and candid nature, permitted ; but he never addressed her without the blood tinging her pale cheek, and he never entered her presence without her deep dark eyes kindling with a richer glow. As for the young man, he seemed irresistibly drawn to the peace and purity of this character so opposite to his own ; he watched her swift yet soft movements as she went about her household labour, ' ohne hast, ohne rast,' with the same pleasure that he watched the grace-

ful flight of a dove ; he appealed to her continually for her opinion of his art, and listened to her with loving reverence. For Madelon, though by no means what you term an educated woman, was of that natural intelligence which to a great extent supplies education by observation, and had heard and seen so much of art from her childhood, that her power of criticism was considerable when her modesty allowed her to give judgment.

She had a strong influence over Carlos Merle : when he, with his native southern indolence, would lie all through the long sunny hours under the acacia shadows, dreaming of many pictures but executing none, she would approach him gently and murmur : ‘ Dreams are the artist’s heaven ; but they are not the highway to fame, my friend.’ And he, roused by that hint, would then rise, and shake himself, and go within, to work at his great picture for the Salon, or bring his tools into the open air, and sketch all manner of living things and floral life around him.

‘ They love one another,’ I said to Russ, when I had been there a week or two.

‘ I suppose they do,’ he answered reluctantly.
‘ But I hardly approve of it. There have been many

better men here than Carlos; and she has never cared for them.’

‘What is amiss with Carlos?’ I asked; for indeed I liked the young man myself; he was gentle of nature, and often played with me.

‘There is this amiss,’ said shrewd Russ. ‘He is the weaker of the two. Not in talent; he has superb talent: but in character. And there is always woe in such cases.’

‘May she not strengthen him? inspire him?’

‘Where did you catch up that human cant? Do not believe that women ever do that. When a man is strong, but has fallen, a great-minded woman may raise him to her height, to above her height; if she only move him with passion enough. But where a man is radically weak it is not in any woman to do it. A mistress may perhaps, because the tenure of a mistress is always uncertain, which piques and spurs him to retain her; but a wife never will. Her attraction falls away into habit; and her spell dissolves in familiarity.’

‘But look what influence Madelon has over this painter already?’

‘Ah—yes. Because he is a little in love with her; and is under the first charm of her sweet

modest worth, her lofty pure wisdom. But if he were to marry her these would soon grow only wearisome to him, if only by reason of their superiority to himself; and he would be sure to forsake them for sake of some warmer, fuller, and more merely sensual charm. Madelon is an angel to those who have studied her nature; but she is only a quiet good girl of the people to others, and she cannot, you know, be called beautiful.'

'Are only beautiful women beloved then?'

'Oh yes! I have seen men mad for a woman who had scarcely a good feature in her face; but then she had a *diable au corps* that supplied the place of beauty and seduced them.'

'A "*diable au corps*?"'

'*Au corps, et à l'esprit, et à l'âme!* A woman who was once a cat, my dear: which Madelon never can have been.'

I said nothing; though I wondered greatly why a woman was likely to be less beloved because she was an angel, than if she had been a cat; and I wondered also why a '*diable au corps*' should be such a great attraction.

I do not wonder now: nor will you either, if you have studied the sex, and know all that Russ

meant by the three little words.

However, despite the chill that he threw on it, I continued to weave my little romance in those pleasant summer days, under the great blossoming lilacs and lindens of the place of my refuge ; and I think that Madelon and Carlos Merle wove theirs too.

She was seldom alone with him, for the white tower of Mère Manon's head-gear was ever in sight, in the same chamber or through some open door. But continually when she was out among the flowers, or the poultry, or the beehives, tying up the sweet-scented stocks, or gathering the rose-leaves to dry for pot-pourri, or calling the pigeons around for food, Carlos would come down from his painting-attic, and saunter forth likewise, and stand beside her in his picturesque linen blouse, with the sun on his handsome golden head, smoking, and smiling, and sometimes tendering a nominal help.

And at such times he would talk tenderly to her, wistfully and sadly too, for he was alone in the world, and poor, and very ambitious ; and Madelon would let the roseleaves roll down on the turf again, or the grain all tumble in a heap at her feet, whilst she listened with tears that did not fall just gleaming in her great soft eyes ;—the tears of a yearning

sympathy which was, though she scarcely knew it, love.

At such times, also, Russ would growl where he was stretched full length under the trees.

‘There have been many better men here than he,’ he would grumble in my ear, ‘and she never hearkened to one of them like that. Oh, he is well enough; I do not say anything against him; but he is of the stuff, look you, to make a great name by his genius one hour, and kill himself for a courtesan the next.’

I, with the obstinacy of youth, disbelieved his verdict, and thought much better things of this sunny-haired southerner.

I lived a good deal in Carlos’ atelier; in rainy days I was there entirely; and I think that I got to understand him better than stout old Russ, with his preconceived conclusions, ever did. Experience is an excellent spy-glass; but it has this drawback, that Prejudice very often clouds the lens.

Carlos, with all his beauty and talent, and mingled force and indolence, had had but a rough life; and had been sorely tossed and evilly entreated, and had suffered much from poverty and other ills.

This place in its peace and poetry was much such a haven to him as to me ; its calm idyllic days were sweet to him as to myself ; life here, under these blossoming limes, these clouds of foliage and flowers, seemed so still and fair a thing, so fit for dreams, so free of pain.

There are pauses in all your lives in which a balmy rest comes unto you, and you say, ' It is well with me ; I will look neither at the years that lie behind me nor before.' It was such a pause in this young painter's. In such a season a young man's 'fancies lightly turn to thoughts of love : '—love for any woman near to him ; any woman youthful enough to have in her the likeness of an ideal, and fair enough to seem to him the source whence his peace comes. Madelon was both these ; and she was more : she was a woman who won his reverence by her pure straight thoughts, free of all guile ; who charmed his eye with the grave grace and the lithe ease of her movements ; and who made that poverty, which so long had been the King of Terrors to him, wear an aspect of sweet serene simplicity, which appeared of higher worth than riches.

He loved her therefore ; loved her truthfully ; if

in such a season of summer and of rest he would have thus loved equally any mindless, laughing, red-lipped girl, or any dark-browed, lustrous-eyed faithless wanton, who should have been beside him in that soft maturity of the full year.

The influence Madelon had on him was very genuine, if not destined to be very enduring. She seldom advised ; she never preached ; she was disposed rather to undervalue her own powers of judgment, than to exalt them. But the very sight of her, in the untiring industry of her simple life, was of itself a tonic to the indolence of genius ; and beneath her honest humility there was a force of enthusiasm for all high purpose and achievement, that acted as a fulcrum to the too facile talents of her guest.

• What he felt towards her it was plain to see ; her own feelings were deeper hid, and less easy to guess. But that his presence was welcome to her, and his success dear, there could be little doubt ; and her sincere belief in the greatness of his future was in itself enough to stimulate a man of spirit and of sensitiveness towards the realization of its inspiring prophecies.

So the summer sped sweetly away with us all ;

the passing of time scarcely noticed except by the change of apple-buds to fruit, and the appearance and disappearance of the ruddy gold-starred strawberries underneath their leaves.

Two other artists passed part of the season there, but they were two aged men, severally painters of landscape and of animals ; and their presence in no way jarred upon the harmony. Indeed, in a manner they contributed to it, for they had both fame and influence in the world of art, and they also saw great things in the works of Carlos Merle, and bade him be sure of that ultimate victory over the world, of which he often despaired : the ten years in which he had studied art having been a decade of failure, neglect, and privation.

With fresh heart put into him, the young man laboured hard during those long, clear, midsummer days ; taking his recompense in the cool of the dewy evenings, with the great stars shining out, and the nightingales singing in the orchard, whilst Madelon, sitting in the porch, let her work fall upon her knee, and listened to him as he murmured passages of the *Nuits d'Octobre*, or of the *Chants du Crépuscule*, their melancholy and fervid poetry seeming, indeed, to be the very voices of the night.

I did not share Russ's contempt for Art. To me it always appeared a marvellous sorcery this, through which, by means of pigments and of oils, all things of nature were made to have their being on a dull, dead piece of pine-wood or of paper. I have moaned at the misery of Landseer's 'St Giles;' I have barked furiously at the hunting scenes of Snyders; I have howled with grief before the 'Dead Trumpeter's' dog at Avignon; I have longed for old Trust to see the sheep of Bonheur and of Verbœckhoven; I have thirsted to pull the meat out of the basket of that bloated 'Jack in Office';—therefore there cannot be a doubt but that I have the true feeling for art in me. For this lies, I humbly submit, not half so much in the sharpness of criticism, as it does in the credence of sympathy.

Hence I watched with interest the progress of the great picture with which Carlos was about to challenge the verdict of Paris in the winter exhibition of the Salon.

It was a very peculiar picture; in a style that is not popular in these days, when you are fond of little cabinet sketches of every-day life, and of a realism that faithfully reproduces every rent in a worn carpet, every knot in a carpenter's piece of deal.

This picture of Carlos was gorgeous in hue, shadowy in meaning, had but little detail, and was of a terrible force and a passionate poetry. And yet the subject was very simple. It was only a man lying dead in a hot glow of sunset, with a wondrous fair face, and a fearful woe set upon it; self-slain it was easy to tell; and away from him, looking back over her shoulder, was stealing, through the hush and the heat, with the light of the west all about her like a fire, a woman, with a wicked laugh upon her mouth, and her bosom all bare, and her hand gathering up rich disordered gold-broidered robes. This strange work, which had no story, was called simply 'Faustine' and it spoke for itself.

It was of this subject and its treatment that the painters who came and went that summer at the Silver Stag predicted such great things.

There was a little one, a highly-finished study also, which he intended to send with it, for sake of the contrast, as I suppose. This was quite a small picture of a woman sitting in cool, gray, silver-toned light, that came in through an ivy-hung lattice; her work, a common shirt of serge, had fallen on her lap, and her eyes were lifted to the soft night sky with-

out, where the first stars were gleaming. The subject was of the slightest and simplest; but the colour, the patience, the tender poetry in this moonlit face, made it beautiful. It was on this that he had been engaged when Russ told me that he was painting the portrait of Madelon Bris.

‘Send them both,’ said one of the aged artists to him. ‘They show that you can feel and fathom the two extreme opposites of woman’s nature. Without being able to do this, neither painter nor poet can be great.’

Doubtless, the old man was right.

But how many of you men write, think, paint, and speak as though there were but one of these two sides to womanhood—according as the brazen, or the silvern, round of the shield has been turned to you.

It was into autumn when those two paintings were altogether completed. Madelon looked at the one which so much resembled her, of which she had indeed been alike the theme and the inspiration, with a shy sweet pleasure, that blushed a little in her pale cheek, and spoke eloquently in her dark eyes. But before the *Faustine* she stood far longer, lost in thought; gazing at it with an intensity, a

wistful wonder, a fascinated horror—even as a woman may gaze at a rival who, though steeped in sin, is yet through sin victorious.

It was in the hush of an October evening that she stood looking at it thus for the hundredth time; his latest touch having been put to it; making more wicked the laugh of the courtesan, more lurid the sunset glow, more glittering her robes of cloth of gold, more white and rigid the face of the dead man.

The evening was very warm. The leaves of the creepers around the wide lattice were tinged with amber and crimson; the sun was burning in the west; the great golden pears hung motionless amongst their still green leaves; the fragrance of ripened fruit, and of damp earth, and of late roses, came in on the western wind.

The large wooden chamber was half in shadow, half in light; the only sound upon the silence was the lowing of the cattle in the distant fields, and the coo of the doves ere they settled to rest. All was cool, and still, and balmy.

Carlos approached her when she stood in front of the Faustine.

‘Why will you look so much at that picture?’

he said gently. 'Why not look rather at the other, which is like yourself?'

Madelon did not answer for some moments, and I thought a faint shudder came over her.

'It has the fascination of the unknown for me,' she answered simply.

'The unknown, indeed! But that is not all?'

'Not quite all. I am trying to see wherein lies that woman's power—that terrible power which has ended in stretching him there—dead.'

'You cannot. No woman can see it—unless she be like that woman herself.'

'Are you sure of that? I am not.'

'Why? You say it is the sorcery of the unknown. In saying that you have said—you cannot comprehend it.'

'I ought to have said rather—the unfamiliar. It cannot be unknown to me, since I feel it. It hurts me; it oppresses me; it is an awful thing—that witchery of sin, that has such irresistible seduction for all men!'

And whilst she spoke she still gazed with the same peculiar intensity of regard into the wicked eyes of the Faustine, till it seemed as though she read a living mind, a living vice, a living lie, in that

pictured semblance of a gold-decked crime.

Carlos, in answer, moved the other picture before her.

‘Nay,’ he said softly, ‘if Faustine triumph over some, others are saved—saved by such pure eyes as those that win them to their higher dreams,—to duty, peace, and honour. For a season Faustine may allure: but the gold on her garments is bought by blood, and the cruel hot sun of passion kills. Men seek to rest for their lifetime in the holy light of those calm stars.’

Madelon smiled: the smile of a woman who believes, and for whom belief is beatitude. Yet the smile died soon upon her face, and she looked not at the woman who sat dreaming in the starlight, but still on the wicked eyes of the Faustine.

‘It may be so,’ she said, under her breath; ‘but your pencil was closer to truth than your words. Look!—he—lies dead; and she—she sits there by the lattice *alone*.’

Then she passed swiftly from the painting chamber, as though fearful that her answer bore some interpretation that she could ill endure to hear him give: some self-betrayal which for one brief moment had escaped her.

Alone ! Carlos echoed the word as he stood before the little portrait, which caught the fading light of the west upon it. The word seemed to strike heavily on his ear ; dully upon his heart, as with the melancholy of a foreboding.

This little slender simple study had more sadness in it than he had ever noted whilst occupied in creating it. The weary folding of the hands, the meditation of the uplifted eyes, the thoughtful shadowy smile upon the mouth, the faint gray light that seemed to float around the form ;—all were sad with the infinite sadness of resignation, the sadness of a woman alone with her perished youth ;—alone for evermore.

The face was the face of Madelon ; but on it was a grief, around it was a solitude, that were as yet far from her ; that as yet had never even touched her cheerful tranquil life.

‘ It is Faustine, who dies alone ! ’ he muttered, as though he repelled the thought her words had conjured up. ‘ Not such women as Madelon. They die in the ripeness of time, after a life of peace, with their children and their grandchildren about them.’

He went to the open window and leaned his

arms on it, and looked down on the garden below. He was very thoughtful and touched, I thought with a reflex of Madelon's sadness.

I wondered if he had ever been beneath the sorcery of such as that Faustine whom he had painted there: or—whether it were only by some foreboding of a fate to come that he had dreamed that dark and awful story, and wrought it out with colour till it seemed the record of a fact.

I could not but fancy it the last.

The fair face of this young painter was very frank, and tender, and eager; it had sorrow, and unrest, and desire upon it, but these were all untainted by evil; it had rather the longing for a fuller life in it than the fatigue of one by whom the uttermost possibilities of life have been exhausted.

Perhaps I hardly reasoned thus, then; but I felt it: and now, looking back to that time through the light of my experience, I am certain that I translated aright the look upon his features.

As he leaned on the wooden window-sill, in the still green garden beneath, where the moonlight already was stealing, he saw Madelon. She was walking amidst her flowers, that grew half wild amidst the grass and bushes. Now and then she

stooped and raised some fallen carnation, or lifted some rose, which, overladen with dew, drooped downward and trembled, as a human heart that is too happy sinks and trembles with apprehension.

Now and then, too, she moved aside, that her foot should not crush some tiny crawling thing, that had its one short hour of harmless joy amongst the leaves and grasses : now and then she lifted some little brown glow-worm, with its brightly burning lamp, up to some place of safety, on a leafy bough, or in the cup of a late lily : nay, even a beetle creeping with its load homeward, or even a sand-worm crawling in the gravelled way, she stepped aside from, leaving them their life.

Would that more amongst you had that tender pity ; had that reverence for the wonder of existence which is as great in the tiniest fly that wings its way as in the great leviathan of the sea. All things must suffer, and must think, since all things dread and trust : can there be fear without mental torture ? Can there be trust without emotional power ? Aye—and thrusting a pin through the beetle's body and cutting the brain from the living pigeon, in your hideous dissecting rooms, will not teach you this : it will only teach you to be blind to it.



The young man, leaning from the casement, hidden himself amongst the thick screen of the ivy, watched her as she moved. Perhaps that gentle compassion for the 'lowliest thing that lived' had greater sweetness in his sight because, to him, the world of men had been cruel and hard; and the world of women had had for him some scorn, since he had not owned the gold that buys their kisses.

When the stones of poverty and of disdain are rained from many hands upon one single head, he on whom they fall—being defenceless—grows one of two things beneath the storm: either he becomes case-hardened and ruthless in revenge, or he grows weak as water, and is ready to sell his soul for the sweet balm of pity. To Carlos Merle—with the heart of a woman in his godlike young form—pity and comprehension bore so fair a likeness to love that, paying them with gratitude, he dreamed gratitude was also love. This error is common with you all; commonest with the tenderest of your natures: but it is an error which often costs you more heavily than sin itself. For, amongst you men and women, though there be absolute passion without love, there is no absolute love without passion.

He watched her thus awhile, where she went amongst the trees, with the dark graceful folds of her dress sweeping aside the dews.

On a sudden impulse, as it seemed, he left his studio, and ran lightly down the old broad oaken stairs, and went out into the garden. He was at her side ere she had heard his steps that fell so lightly on the grass. She started a little, and turned from him, as I noticed, having followed him myself out into the balmy evening air.

‘Madelon,’ he said to her, with a tremor in his voice, ‘Madelon,—if you will let it be so, you shall never sit at the lattice alone.’

She gave him one quick glance under her dark deep lashes ; then she was silent, her hand gathering the feathery crowns of tall seeding grasses that grew round her.

‘May it be so?’ he murmured. ‘Have you faith enough in me to let me enter your life? You can make me what you will: will you give me place beside you always?’

She did not answer, but her drooped face flushed till all its colourlessness changed to a hot scarlet radiance, like the flush on the latest autumn roses.

‘Tell me,’ he murmured eagerly. ‘Can it be—

that you have less pity for me than for that glow-worm that you lifted out of harm a moment ago? I love you, Madelon; you must have known it all this summer through, and I think—I think—you have some love to give in recompense?'

The glow died from her face; great tears stood unshed in her eyes; she trembled greatly whilst she left her hand in his.

'It is not a question of my love,' she said, scarce audibly. 'It is of your peace,—your greatness,—your future. These lie far apart from me.'

'The ylie with you: with you alone!' he answered her, with passionate belief in his own truth as he drew her nearer and nearer, and stooped his golden head, and kissed her where they stood beneath the great shadows of the dying limes.

For a moment Madelon surrendered herself to that sweet intoxication. But the breathless trance endured but a little space; she drew herself from him, and looked straight up into his eyes with that deep glance of hers that had in it such exhaustless tenderness and power of sacrifice.

'You speak in haste,' she said tremulously. 'I am the only woman near you; you have found some comprehension and some sympathy in me; you

have a noble nature ;—and you offer me love. But—though I love you, Carlos, I am not fit to be your wife !’

‘Not fit ! My God !’ he cried, ‘what grace, what excellence, what purity of womanhood have there ever been found lacking in you ?’

She smiled faintly ; but her eyes never lost their steady, meditative wistfulness of regard.

‘Nay—I speak the truth,’ she said gently. ‘I am but one of the people ; I have ever laboured with my hands ; I am ignorant, even if sympathy teach me some few things. You will be great, my friend ; you will have fame, and fame brings fortune ; I shall be no meet companion for you in that new life which so surely waits for you. I love you—’

She paused, and stretched her hands out to him in a gesture of infinite tenderness, though her face the while grew yet more deadly pale.

‘See ! I do not seek to deny it or to hide it. I love you, Carlos, but *because* I love you, I know—I know—that there will be no place for me in your future !’

He seized her outstretched hands, and poured forth poetic burning words of eloquence, that

thrilled out upon the stillness of the autumn twilight, and seemed to scorch and stagger her as they pierced her heart. But for her he swore he had been worthless ; crushed beneath the load of poverty and of the world's neglect. Her influence alone had breathed into him the strength to give form and substance to the fair dream of an idle brain. He had no name nor place in the world as yet : should he win either ever, it would be through her inspiration ; through that brave acceptance of the yoke of toil, which, beholding in her, he at length had followed.

So he urged and pleaded till the ardent eloquence of words was as a whirl of fire in which her thought and her will were caught, and blinded, and consumed. Yet not wholly ; for this woman's love was—unlike the love of her sex—without one taint of selfishness, or of vain desire, or of untrue appraisalment.

‘ You speak generously,’ she murmured, whilst her heart heaved and her lips quivered. ‘ But you speak in blindness. You love me now—oh yes !—but for how long ? Nay—it is not that I distrust you. I distrust myself. I may be well in your sight here—here in solitude and in summer—but with the moment that brings you fame, and that the

world usurps you, I shall be no more than a kindly memory in your heart—'

'A memory ! If ever I love you less, if ever I leave your side, may God—'

'Hush ! The future is not in your hands ; not in mine. Call no curse upon it. It will not be possible that you should love me always. I have not beauty ; I have not knowledge ; I am only, after all, a peasant trained to household labours. If I were to become your wife, what would you say in the years to come ?—you would say this woman has no likeness with my life as it stands now ; no kinship with my fame ; no fitness for my career. You would say it—assuredly—in your own heart—'

'Are you mad ?' he cried with impetuous interruption. 'Am I a noble or a prince, that you should look on me with this proud humility—treat me thus, as though I were some creature of a higher sphere descended to you ? You know my history, my poverty, my dependence on my own labours, the neglect the world has had of me, the chances that I shall never be able, do what I may, to give my name to fame ? As I stand now, I am barely your equal. You have certain possessions ; I have none. To me this sweet and tranquil place is the happiest

home that I have ever known. Is it a little thing to ask you to let me share it always?—to ask you to let me, in the fever and disappointments of a painter's career always, have its rest and innocence to return to for shelter and for hope? No! it is because it is so great a thing—a thing so utterly beyond my rights to claim and my power to requite—that you draw yourself aloof from me, and plead your own unworthiness, in the noble falsehood of a woman's pity!'

The words poured from his lips with all the vivacious fire of his southerner's temperament, and with all the fiery reproach of that upbraiding selfishness which always sounds upon a woman's ear as love itself incarnate. It moved her strangely. The colour came and went upon her face; her limbs trembled; her lips parted with swift uneven breaths. She looked up swiftly in his face with the great tears heavy on her lashes:

'Ah, if I could be of use or service to you,' she murmured; 'if I could be sure that you never could repent.'

She needed to say no more: he stooped again his beautiful fair head, and his lips rested on hers unchidden.

They wandered long together that evening, through the lonely moonlit orchards, and the deep cool gardens; on which the last glow, and the last breeze, and the last sigh of the dying summer were lingering, as though loth to pass away and leave the earth to silence, snow, and shadow.





CHAPTER XII.

FAUSTINA VICTRIX.

LIFE at the Silver Stag, which had been full of peace before, now deepened into happiness. The beatitude of confessed and mutual love was there ; nor was there any hindrance to it, nor any shade to mar it.

The old Mère Bris had grown to regard with unusual favour this golden-haired young stranger, who treated her with all a son's reverent kindliness ; and she offered no opposition to his marriage with Madelon, desiring only that he should achieve some public success that should be a guarantee of his ability to add somewhat to her own slender store. And to this Carlos Merle offered but little opposi-

tion : he was too proud and honest to seek to live in idleness upon these women ; and indeed, though he knew it not, so much of the desire of rest, and so little of the desire of passion, was in his love, that it was almost enough to him to be certain of this simple asylum and this innocent affection that he had already gained. So all things went smoothly and joyously in this primitive and pleasant spot. His pictures were completed ; his time was his own ; he could spend it at will with Madelon ; aiding her in her out-door tasks ; watching her in her in-door occupations ; listening kindly to the old dame's legendary lore ; and even spending his strength in such useful fashion as the hewing of wood for the winter firing, and the fetching of buckets of water from the distant well in the orchard. As for Madelon—there was in her fathomless eyes such a look of tranquil intensity, of unutterable joy, as I have never seen on any human face ; she spoke but seldom ; but her voice as she sang at her work had the sweetness in it of one continual hymn of praise ; and to her the russet autumn was as the golden dawning of years of perpetual summer.

Russ alone was ill-satisfied.

‘ It is not well,’ he muttered to me. ‘ It is not

well. He is sincere?—oh yes, he is sincere; men mostly are whilst they talk of love. But it is only affection with him; there is no passion in it; and no man, with his beauty and his nature, ever passes by passion all his life long. He will know that one day—and she too. But we can do no good. Don't let us talk of it.'

'Is passion such a good thing, then?'

Russ growled a whole satire.

'Good? It is a devil, my dear: and one that the dog I told you about never succeeded in driving out, whether from church, or castle, or cottage. It is a devil that will tempt Carlos Merle, sooner or later; and it will drag him away from her in the end, let him seek or strive as he may.'

The winter soon came. It was very cold, but very bright. Carlos sold a little landscape to a stranger who, resting at the Silver Stag, chanced to see, and paid five gold pieces for it; and he spent all the five in purchasing a set of furs for Madelon. She chid him gently for the extravagance, but smiled on him for the love shown therein. She wrapped them about her mother, and moved blithely in the snow to feed her poultry and her doves, quite warm in her dress of serge, from

the rapture and the peace that dwelt together in her heart.

The broad low kitchen of the place was always ruddily bright from the big fire of wood that burned on an old-fashioned hearth, built long, they said, ere stoves were known. It had a pleasant odour always in it, from the many herbs that hung from the ceiling beams ; knots of dried thyme, and marjoram, and sage, and rue. The reddened light of the stormy winter days played cheerily upon the brass and pewter that, shining like gold and silver, filled the black oak shelves.

All day long the little birds would crowd under the casements for food that Madelon threw them ; and the droll-visaged ducks, and the neat coquettish hens, when wet or cold, would come through the door she opened for them—, the former with solemn march, and shrewd all-seeing eyes, the latter with coy dainty steps, and shy sidelong glances,—and go straightway to the hearth, and there sit and dry their plumage and dress themselves, and turn their heads over their shoulders to survey themselves, precisely as I have seen great ladies do before their mirrors. When dusk closed in, and the fowls were all at roost, and the oil lamp lighted, Russ and I

would lie alone within the warmth of the logs, watching, with dreamy pleasure, the big copper kettle of soup swinging in the chimney; while old Mère Bris dozed in the corner, and Madelon, with her great eyes all dilated and eloquent, listened to some *Chant du Siècle* read aloud to her by her lover's melodious vibrating voice.

It was a happy winter time; and in it I almost forgot my two past years of misery. Not quite: for a dog never wholly forgets; and, having his spirit once broken, is never altogether the same dog again. Naturally the eyes of creatures of our race are fuller of glee, mirth, readiness, and gladness than the eyes of any other living things; but most of them are clouded by sadness, by terror, and by the constant apprehension which your brutal training leaves on them, long before they have even reached their prime.

It was a hard winter, so far as cold went. The great black woods were ice-bound, and the water of the duck-pond had to be broken every morning for the old carp to breathe. Madelon put over the doorway a little oat-sheaf for the birds, in a fashion she had learned of some German artist; and the casements were thick with dense, white, glittering frost

with every dawn that rose. But though so chill without, life went within gladly and brightly. The first real chill of the year seemed to fall when it was no longer possible for Carlos to longer defer his visit to the Salon.

His pictures had been accepted : he went to the assembling of the critics. He was to rest there the night, and was to return on the morrow, bringing his tidings with him. As he quitted the little porch Madelon thrust a covered basket into his hand.

‘It is the carrier-dove Fleurette,’ she whispered to him, while her voice was full of love not spoken in phrases. ‘She has often come between this and Paris. If all be well with you, loose her. She will be back here in two hours.’

So Fleurette went with him on his pilgrimage ; for the electric wires were a costliness not dreamed of by these poor and simple people. Russ, and I, and Madelon tarried behind, in the old, oaken, dusky chamber. It was a drear, dark day, with fitful gusts of storm-wind, and sudden driving clouds of rain,—a day full of melancholy and of foreboding ; a day that makes dogs howl, and men pen satires, and women sit all day long wearily

watching the sweeping on and off of the black mists. Madelon did her household work of the day none the less quickly or well ; but every now and then she started, as a blast shook the house ; and when her labour was done, sat with fevered cheeks by the casement, looking out with wistful eyes for the clearance of the skies that should allow the dove's soft, slender wings to beat their safe way home. Her whole soul was in her lover's fame, even though she knew fame was her cruelest rival.

The day passed very wearily to us all.

There came back no Fleurette.

Madelon kept the shutters down an hour later than was her custom, and stood gazing out into the shadowy bleak night for the white small form of her messenger of hope.

'Close the window, *ma fille*,' called her old mother from the chimney-corner. 'It is quite dark, and there may come beggars around, or worse,—drawn by the light in the lattice.'

Madelon obeyed with that curiously implicit obedience which characterizes French filial duty, and came and sat down by her lamp, and began to sew,—mending a worn summer blouse of Carlos Merle's. Her mother did not see that her eyes

were wet with tears—but I saw. ‘*Je reste: tu t’en vas!*’ Such is eternally the requiem over all women’s loves; when the woman has loved well.

The long evening went slowly, very slowly. The bubbling of the copper pot, and the cracking of the fire logs, were the only sounds upon its stillness. Russ once moved towards her, and laid his great head on her knee, and gazed into her face with great loving eyes of sympathy and reverent pity. Madelon stooped and kissed him, and tears fell on his forehead.

‘It is thus that it must be, Russ,’ she murmured over him.

The evening and the night passed; the morning broke fairer, though still cold. About noon a little flash of white glimmered in the steely sky; there was a murmuring noise; and, beating against the casement, there fell down the dove. Madelon caught her with a low cry.

She was not cold nor wet, and could not have been loosed until that morning. He had forgotten to send her home.

Beneath her left wing was a note. As Madelon read it she grew pale—paler than she ever had been through all this winter-time.

‘What does he say?’ cried the old mother from her chimney-corner, eager to learn the best or worst.

Madelon waited a moment ere she replied. When she did so her voice was calm.

‘Only three words, *ma mère*. “Success! Return to-morrow.”’

‘To-morrow!’ cried *Mère Bris*. ‘He said this day—this day, beyond a doubt.’

‘Yes. But how likely it is that he has met with friends, and—see, *mère*—he has success at last. No wonder he stays from us!’

Then she left the chamber; closing the door upon her, and carrying with her the tired, thirsty, ruffled dove.

Carlos did not come that day, nor the next, nor the next.

Madelon said nothing: not a word: save at such times as she answered, to her mother’s petulant quibbles, that it was natural and fitting he should stay; that he was his own master; and that he owed them nothing.

But the time dragged drearily; and she never sent *Fleurette* back to the city.

With the fourth day indeed he came, sweeping

through the snow, with his yellow locks on the wind, and his fair face hot with proud passionate glow. He rushed straight to where Madelon stood, having risen in startled amaze; he clasped her hands, he kissed her dress, he showered letters, and papers, and gold upon her lap; at last he flung himself at her feet, and letting his head drop down upon her knees, sobbed like a woman.

‘I have the desire of my life!’ he cried to her.
‘I have the desire of my life; I am famous!’

It seemed, as I gathered awhile afterwards, that he had in truth achieved the most singular success of the winter exhibitions, and redeemed, almost in a day, the painful and long decade of disappointment and of failure. The general crowds of Paris flocked to stand before the Faustine: but some half score of perfect judges offered him well nigh its weight in gold for that little study of the woman at the lattice.

Faustine was one of those wonderful and instantaneous successes which sometimes seize on the world with a force quite outside criticism, and quite beyond attack.

People flocked in herds to see it; and on the class of which it was the representative it seemed,

they said, to exercise the strongest and most irresistible fascination.

The day of the first exhibition had been a day of unshadowed triumph for Carlos. His name had leapt to all the lips of Paris; and great artists, long neglectful and co temptuous of him, had turned and surveyed him with a curious puzzled look, as though they said, 'Eh, then, who is this that has been amongst us, and that we have denied?'

They denied him no longer. The popular voice is very seldom indeed the voice divine; but occasionally it does speak with the prescience, the spontaneity, the irresistible verdict of a god-like fiat. It spoke thus in his election: and against such a choice his rivals had no power.

The Faustine had been sold ere it had hung two hours: sold for an enormous sum, as many said. For the Woman at the Lattice he had, with an artist's and a lover's improvident unwise spirit of fanciful attachment, refused all the offers made to him.

'Are you mad?' painters had whispered him. 'Faustine in a year will be worth to you millions of francs, and that little panel will never again fetch so much as they tender you for it now.' But Carlos had shaken his head, and been firm. 'Shall

a man sell his soul ? ' he had said in his heart. So the Faustine hung there, sold at her birth, as befitted the likeness of a courtesan : but for the woman in the moonlight there was no gold chaffered.

And he came back to us, wild and drunk with the wine of his fame ; he wept, he laughed, he threw himself like a child before the crucifix ; he scattered grain in huge golden showers to the birds upon the snow ; he waltzed, he sang, he was like one possessed ; and all this was beautiful in him, because his own youth had so much beauty ; and all his ecstasies had so much truth. Then he grew very quiet, and came and stretched himself upon the hearth, and lay there with his head leaning upon Madelon's knee.

' I shall be great,' he murmured passionately to her. ' Already—in a day—my name is famous, and men say of my work that it has in it the germ of the eternal. And what should I have been without you ?—you, to whom riches, and fame, and honours, and life, all are due ! '

Her face was in shadow, and he was not looking up to it, but into the burning embers of the wood ; or he would have seen a smile upon it that only the martyrs wear.

‘Be great; be greatest,’ she whispered to him.
‘So shall I be content.’

And yet I think she knew so well that, saying this, she also said—‘go from me, and never more return.’

Division already had commenced: passion and ambition will scarce ever live together. They are as two fierce parasites which will not share with that which they cling to and corrode, but must have all or nothing. Here and there, indeed, they may grow side by side together; when they do, the world has no strength to stand against that furious fusion of strange forces.

The first note of fame to him brought the first note of pain to her. He needed now to be perpetually passing to Paris. It seems that fame is such an *ignis fatuus* that a man, if he once lose his personal watch over it, fears to see it sink into the marshes of oblivion.

It was natural that he rejoiced in his fresh-won success; that the new voices of praise were very sweet upon his long-thirsting ear; that the new life which had opened for him allured him with an enchantment he scarcely sought to resist.

It was natural, moreover, for his name’s sake,

or he thought it was, that he should have a studio in the heart of the artist world, now that this world was busied with his works. All Madelon said was, simply, 'What is best for thee, is for me happiest.'

The old mother grumbled at the thought of his considering some other abode so needful for him just because he had won his way a little on to the tongues of men.

But he pleaded his excuse with his graceful kindly filial fashion.

'Nay, mère, it is not a home that I seek; my home is here,' he answered her. 'I do but go to Paris as to an armoury shop, where I may be nigh at hand for the battle; to circumvent my foes, and to secure my victories.'

And Madelon urged his cause also. 'It is best indeed, mère. All painters must have a working-place in Paris. The world is never so fond of genius that it will ever run far into strange corners and village hearths to seek it. It is best out in the mart, with the rest of men's merchandise.'

'You do not want to be happy, Madelon!' retorted the old woman sharply.

Madelon smiled; that same sweet dreamy smile that had such an unfathomable meaning in it.

‘Nay, mère,’ she answered, ‘let him be so first.’

So it came to pass that when the turn of the year came, and the first signs of life were stirring under the bark of the trees, and the ice of the pools, and the dark sodden mould of the gardens, Carlos Merle had a studio of his own in the heart of the Art world of Paris, and stayed there all the week, and only came to the Silver Stag at the close of each sixth day.

It was inevitable, I suppose; they said so. Paris had a place for him now, and he went to fill it: the voices were glad about him, they were pleasant on his ear. The world spoke his name; he liked to hear it sounding. Men pointed him out when he passed; he was proud of that finger homage. Crowds stood all day long about his pictures; he was pleased to stand near also, and see that worship of the multitude which worships the artist as it worships the god—blindly and yet unerringly. It was natural, I suppose, that Paris should draw him thus, daily and daily, more and more towards it. It was natural, doubtless;—but at the Silver Stag the spring was dreary.

The sweet scent of the russet fallow turned upwards under the plough, the bees began to

boom about in the pale sunshine, the ducks found shoots of cress under the chill water, the swallows came from Africa, and as they twittered underneath the eaves, told to the home-staying doves a thousand stories of the old Libyan world. It was earliest spring with all things, but it seemed to us rather like the setting than the resurrection of the year.

Yet Carlos came with every seventh day; came with burning eyes, and eager words, and proud, glad laughter, and spoke incessantly of the great life that had opened to him with his victory. The world was transfigured to him. He was no longer poor, or neglected, or alone. He had present ease and future wealth secured. Men sought him; houses opened to him; friends came around him; he was known; and in that one word there lies for genius all the width that yawns between heaven and hell. The very suddenness of it made it the sweeter; and he went to the phantasmagoria of the world with all the eagerness, and almost all the ignorance, of a child.

Vice had had scant temptation for him earlier, because clothed in rags rather than in robes. But now pleasure, for the first time, smiled on him from

the sweet, gay eyes of dainty, velvet-footed, silvery-voiced women. Their allurements were not easily forgotten when he returned to the quiet homely innocence of his little woodland shelter. Not that he loved it less, or less loved Madelon ; but he seemed like the carrier-birds, which, though they are never easy until they have reached their home, yet, resting but a moment there, desire to fly forth again.

He poured out on her the same passionate gratitude. He still beheld in her the force whereby he had been lifted up to greatness. He came to her for all his highest inspirations. He brought to her, as of yore, all his thoughts, and his hopes, and his dreams. He beheld in her the most perfect of created women, whose shoe-latchet he was not worthy to unloose. But still,—with the sunrise of every first day of the week he went, as an arrow from the bow ; and though his eyes oftentimes looked back, his swift feet never tarried once.

On some of these seasons of departure he would take me with him ; having grown to like me, in a fashion, though not deeply. Take me into the great, white, gleaming city, that seemed all colour, and tinsel, and marble, and foliage ; and into his little atelier, where already the world was flocking, be-

cause he had painted a courtesan in such sort that all of her kind recognized their own likeness.

The atelier was somewhat high in air, in a famous part of the artist-town. He had taken it from a rich young amateur, and it was full of eastern stuffs, curious woods, cabinets, cushions, and all manner of quaint, glittering rubbish, brought from Asian bazaars. Its window looked on a pile of zinc roof, and its spiral staircase was dark and narrow, and its north light was obscured. If I had been an artist, I think I should never have painted so well in this small, luxurious, gaudy chamber, with its stuffs, and metals, and skins, as in that broad, low, wooden room, all open to the light, and swept by the free heavens of winds, and scented by the odours of the woods and fields without. Indeed, I know not why it was, but I felt a curious fancy that in this Parisian studio Carlos would never paint again as he had painted when the Faustine rose to life.

This little, dusky, bedizened, crowded, gilded chamber, with its pieces of art and its fabrics of India, might be a paradise to him, because to him it represented resurrection from a death in life, and was as the temple of victory. But to me it was only a den, pastille-scented, charcoal-heated, stifling with

artificial aroma, and bounded by four narrow close walls, all hung with fantastic gold Japanese shapes, on a ground of black, that made me shudder whenever I looked at them.

It was not dull, for there were throngs all day long, coming in and going out; men and women also, who came because the Faustine was the fashion. Beside, that singular beauty which he possessed was fair in the sight of the sated dames of the capital, as in the thoughtful, wistful eyes of Madelon. It was a beauty untamed and yet soft, virile and yet appealing, that had a sorcery for women; and ere long the great ladies of Paris vied to seat this superb young painter at their board and welcome him within their presence-chambers. '*Je suis pauvre,*' he would object to their flattering overtures, with his gracious half-proud diffidence. '*Qu'est ce que c'est ça ?*' they would answer.

So, though he waited within all the day, I was always left alone at twilight, and the key was turned in the studio door, and rarely ever again unturned until the first streak of dawn. He painted scarcely at all. How could he? He had done so much in the summer and early autumn, because he had gone to bed almost with the kine, and risen

always with the lark. But now that his days and evenings were all spent either in the gay, wild, laughing company of wits, and rhyemsters, and playwrights, and artists, or in the dazzling brilliancies of the great world of society, work was impossible.

Do not think that Carlos spent all his gains upon himself. Oh no! He spent them royally; and every manner of good thing and gracious gift found the way to *Mère Bris* or to *Madelon*. He had received as many orders as he would have been able to execute, working at the hardest, in the coming two years; and no thought that an hour's illness, a street accident, a horse's kick, might turn his *el-dorado* afresh into a desert, ever weighed on the sunny sanguine glow of his fervid temperament. He intended to labour assiduously, he said—when—when all this novelty should have worn off—when he should have, in a measure, received his recompense for his ten years of weariness and pain.

So that when with every sixth day he went to the *Silver Stag*, and the old mother would ask petulantly of him what the week's work had beheld done, he would murmur hurriedly a thousand picturesque words, sketching a thousand picturesque scenes. It was the spring; it was just April; it was the

height of the world's follies. All things seemed so fair and new ; people were kind ; and the days fled so fast ; and friendships such as those he made were fame and fortune likewise. And Madelon, who never asked him questions such as these, would call softly across to her mother from whence she sat at work by the casement, ' Carlos is right, mère. It is such people as these that are fitting for him ; their voices are fame.'

But I think she only said it to disarm the sharpness of the old woman's irritable tongue ; for I think that Madelon knew that the greatness of the artist cannot come from without, that genius is a curlew best rocked on the tossing crest of a roughened sea ; and that for him by whom a thirsty ear is lent to the world's homage, the tocsin of feebleness, if not of failure, has already sounded.

The gladness of the man is come when the crowds lisp his name, and the gold fills his hand, and the women's honeyed adulations buzz like golden bees about his path ; but how often is the greatness of the artist gone, and gone for ever !

Because when the world denies you it is easy to deny the world ; because when the bread is bitter it is easy not to linger at the meal ; because

when the oil is low it is easy to rise with dawn ; because when the body is without surfeit or temptation it is easy to rise above earth on the wings of the spirit. Poverty is very terrible to you, and kills your soul in you sometimes ; but it is like the northern blast that lashes men into vikings, it is not the soft, luscious, south wind that lulls them in to lotos eaters.

In the north wind Carlos Merle had staggered to his feet, and been proud, and been strong, and had conquered ; in the south he was ready to say, — ‘ it is sweet ; leave me alone ; I have lived ! ’

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